

COOKING WITH WILD GAME

Author: **EDA**

Illust: **Kochimo**

VOLUME
22





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MENU

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Character Introductions



~ People of the Forest's Edge ~

	Asuta Tsurumi/Asuta A chef-in-training born in Japan. Though he remembers losing his life in a fire, some strange power has taken him to another world.		Ai Fa The only female hunter at the forest's edge. She seems calm and composed at a glance, but hides strong emotions inside. She has made the decision to welcome Asuta into the Fa clan.
	Donda Ruu The head of the Ruu clan, and one of the three leading clan heads of the forest's edge. An exceedingly skilled hunter. He injured his right shoulder in the battle with the lord of the forest.		Jiba Ruu Donda Ruu's grandmother, and the elder of the Ruu clan. Thanks to Asuta's efforts, she regained the strength needed to keep on living. A precious friend to Ai Fa.
	Jiza Ruu The eldest son of the main Ruu house. He has a strict personality and highly values the laws of the forest's edge. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Darmu Ruu The second son of the main Ruu house. He can be curt and rough at times, and is emotional in general. He injured the palm of his right hand in the battle with the lord of the forest.
	Ludo Ruu The youngest son of the main Ruu house. Mischievous by nature. A stronger hunter than most. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Reina Ruu The second daughter of the main Ruu house. An excellent chef. She also runs the Ruu clan's stalls alongside Sheera Ruu.
	Lala Ruu The third daughter of the main Ruu house. A frank girl who has feelings for Shin Ruu.		Rimee Ruu The youngest Ruu daughter. An earnest, innocent child who specializes in making sweets. She adores Ai Fa and Tara.
	Shin Ruu The eldest son and young clan head of a Ruu branch house. He blames himself for failing to prevent Asuta's kidnapping, and after much training in the aftermath, he became one of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Sheera Ruu The eldest daughter of a Ruu branch house, and Shin Ruu's older sister. She has a mild-mannered personality and has hidden feelings for Darmu Ruu.
	Gazraan Rutim The head of the Rutim clan. A calm-natured man with undeniable wisdom. Also a friend without equal to Asuta. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.		Dan Rutim The former head of the Rutim clan. He possesses uncommon strength as a hunter and is a bighearted man. His favorite food is boned ribs.



Rau Lea

The Lea clan head. A hunter with delicate looks but a fierce nature. One of the top eight under the Ruu clan.



Toor Deen

Originally belonged to a Suun branch house. She is introverted by nature, but she gives her all to assist Asuta with his business. Her skills at making sweets are blossoming.

~ Townsfolk ~



Myme

Mikel's daughter. Following in her father's footsteps, she has put a great deal of effort into improving her cooking skills. Deeply moved by Asuta's cooking, she is experimenting with giba meat on her own.



Mikel

A former chef from the castle town. Due to a crippling injury inflicted on his right hand, he lost his ability to cook professionally. Currently, he lives as a charcoal seller in the Turan lands.



Yumi

The daughter of the owners of an inn called The Westerly Wind. Friendly and cheerful. Seventeen years old. She acts as a bridge between Asuta and her father, who dislikes the people of the forest's edge.



Tara

Dora's daughter. Nine years old. She is becoming close with Rimee Ruu, who is around her age.

Dora

A citizen of the Daleim part of the Genos domain. He sells produce in the post town. Though he once feared the people of the forest's edge, he has since become a strong supporter of Asuta's.



Varkas

A chef from the castle town. Once was the head chef for the house of Turan. Possesses excellent skills that mark him as one of the foremost chefs in Genos, and has no interest in anything but cooking.

Polarth

The second son of the house of Daleim. A close collaborator for the people of the forest's edge. He has been trying to spread delicious food throughout Genos.



Shilly Rou

An apprentice of the master chef Varkas. A strong-willed seventeen-year-old girl with a powerful sense of rivalry toward Asuta.



Roy

A young chef from the castle town. After receiving quite a shock from Reina Ruu and Myme's cooking, he asked to become an apprentice to Varkas.

Timalo

A chef from the castle town. The former assistant head chef for the house of Turan. With his haughty personality, he looks down on Asuta while also feeling a sense of rivalry toward the young chef.



Melfried

The first son of Duke Genos, and the arbitrator with the people of the forest's edge. A cool-headed man who values law and order above all else.

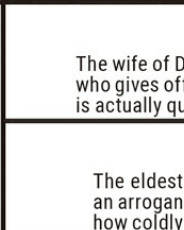
Yang

The head chef of the house of Daleim. Currently, he is working hard to promote the flow of new ingredients into the post town.



Odifia

Eulifia's young daughter. She doesn't allow her emotions to show, like an expressionless doll, but is exceedingly fond of Toor Deen's sweets.



Eulifia

The wife of Duke Genos's eldest son. A noblewoman who gives off an impression of elegance, though she is actually quite cheerful and unrestrained.

Leeheim

The eldest son of the house of Saturas. He has an arrogant personality, and holds a grudge over how coldly Reina Ruu treated him in the past.



Gamley

The leader of the traveling performers known as the Gamley Troupe. He has a cheerful and aloof personality. He specializes in magic tricks using flames.



Pino

A member of the Gamley Troupe. Though she looks like a young girl, her actual age is unknown. She specializes in acrobatics and playing the flute.

Chapter 1: Study Session in the Castle Town

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On the continent of Amusehorn, the months were denoted by colors. The year began with the silver month, and then cycled through the brown, red, vermillion, yellow, green, blue, white, gray, black, indigo, and violet months, for a total of twelve.

However, once every three years, a special gold month was inserted between the silver and brown, giving those years thirteen months. Leap years existed back in my old world too, to adjust for the shifts in the calendar that built up over the years because of the orbits of the Earth or the Moon. Since the coming year was a leap year, the gold month would begin once the silver one ended.

I first started living at the settlement at the forest's edge back on the twenty-fourth of the yellow month. However, I didn't learn that date until a good bit later. It wasn't until the blue month, after the yellow and green months had already passed, that I found out about the local calendar system.

At any rate, by the end of the violet month, I had lived here at the forest's edge for over seven months.

On the twenty-fourth of the yellow month, I had met Ai Fa. Several days later, Rimee Ruu had visited the Fa house, which had led to me forming bonds with the members of the Ruu clan. Then the green month had rolled around, with the Rutim wedding being held in the middle of the month and my post town stall opening in the last third. I had met a ton of people who would become important to me during that month, such as Kamyua Yoshu, Tara and Dora, Milano Mas, Yumi, Shumiral, and "Pops" Balan.

Then, in the blue month, there had been the turmoil with the Suun clan, during which I had met Naudis, Nail, Diel, and Jeeda. Shumiral's Silver Vase and Pops's construction group had also departed around that time. The clan head meeting had been held back at the forest's edge too. With all that had

happened, the blue month really stood out in my memory.

However, the white month that followed had been just as tumultuous, with my abduction to the castle town and the showdown with Cyclaeus. It had also been when I had become acquainted with Duke Marstein Genos and Polarth of the house of Daleim, as well as Mikel, which had made it a real turning point.

After that, the conflict with the Suun clan and the house of Turan had settled down, and the gray and black months had turned out to be relatively peaceful. I had spent that time focusing on pushing my business forward, and toward the end, I met Myme and Varkas.

During the indigo month, I had visited the Daleim lands and the neighboring town of Dabagg for the first time, and then we had opened the outdoor restaurant. As I recalled, the massive giba known as the lord of the forest had also been taken down with the help of the Sauti clan on the final day of the month. Then the sun god's revival festival had been held in the violet month, closing out the year.

Looking back, the last seven months had been really turbulent. However, the days ahead were sure to be super busy too.

Even just considering the near future, Shumiral's Silver Vase would be returning to Genos around the end of the silver month, and after the gold month, we were going to enter into a two-month rainy season. But before all that, there were some things I had promised to do for my acquaintances from the castle town, the Gamley Troupe were still hoping to capture a live giba, Lem Dom's trial to become a hunter hadn't been resolved yet, and Dora was making arrangements for his family to visit the forest's edge... Plus, the Fa clan would soon be entering a break period, and we were planning to hold a festival of the hunt together with the nearby clans. That would be happening sometime in the silver or gold month, so long as there were no major changes in the way the giba were migrating around in the forest.

It was hard to imagine ever feeling bored with this much going on. Now I just had to start tackling the jobs ahead of me one by one.

It was currently the fifth day of the new year—the fifth of the silver month—and we were on our way to the Genos castle town to handle a not-so-small job.

“Thank you so much for going out of your way to invite someone like me, Asuta,” Myme called out after transferring to our wagon from the one she had ridden to the castle gates in, as we were heading toward the former Turan manor, which was now used for welcoming esteemed visitors. Varkas had told us he wanted to observe Myme’s skills, which Mikel had agreed to surprisingly easily.

However, Mikel had firmly refused to come along, despite having been invited, and I hadn’t been inclined to try to persuade him to change his mind. Though he had once been a famed chef, Cycloeus had cruelly taken his ability to cook from him. All things considered, I didn’t feel that it was my place to say anything.

“We’re visiting today so we can check out some new ingredients, and you’re also going to be teaching the chefs from the castle town how to make your fuwano recipe, right, Asuta? I can’t see how I’ll be any help. Is it really okay for me to come along?”

“You really don’t have to worry so much. Polarth’s the one managing everything, and he’s very understanding. He’s been looking forward to trying your cooking too.”

Myme was bringing along some of the dish she had been selling in the post town during the revival festival. Though her cheeks were flushed red with excitement, she also looked a bit worried.

“But it’s not like I can use as many different ingredients as you... The nobles won’t get angry at me for feeding them such a shabby dish, will they?”

“Are you calling it shabby because the ingredients don’t cost all that much? You have nothing to worry about. Polarth is a noble, but he isn’t the type to judge a dish solely on the ingredients it uses.”

Still, Myme’s father had suffered greatly due to the outrageous acts of a noble. The look on her face was as innocent as ever, but she didn’t appear to be completely free of worries. Overall, though, she seemed shockingly peppy, considering her circumstances and her young age. Reina and Sheera Ruu were probably much tenser than her over in the other wagon right now. They would

be presenting a dish today as well: the teriyaki stew they sold in the post town. Varkas had been really harsh when he had tried the stew they had made last time, and now they were going to ask him to sample their cooking again.

But honestly, that was just a bit of personal business between us and Varkas. We still weren't permitted to enter the castle town for that kind of reason alone, though, so if we ever wanted to interact with Varkas, we had to add our request to something the nobles were asking of us, as we were doing today.

Still, Polarth was in charge and had approved eagerly, so we were heading to the castle town with a fairly big crowd in tow. That included me, Myme, Reina Ruu, and Sheera Ruu, plus Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, and Rimee Ruu, who would be our cooking assistants, as well as Sufira Zaza, coming along as an observer. Six hunters were also coming with us, including Ai Fa, Ludo Ruu, Dan Rutim, and three others related to the Ruu whose names I didn't know. The Ruu clan's break period had ended on the second of the silver month, so the rest of their hunters would be out in the forest by now.

Incidentally, we did still have a couple guards protecting us while we were working at our stalls too, since Donda and Jiza Ruu had decided that even with the sun god's revival festival over, there were still a good number of outsiders in the post town, so it was important to exercise caution until things calmed down. However, with the break period over, subordinate clan heads like Rau Lea and Giran Ririn were now busy managing their own houses, so they could no longer act as guards. Even so, Donda Ruu was definitely still showing us favor by sending especially distinguished hunters like Ludo Ruu and Dan Rutim to accompany us.

Then you had Ai Fa. She had injured her ribs in the battle with the lord of the forest, but had finally stopped wearing bandages around her chest and had begun training to rebuild her strength as a hunter.

Any time she wasn't acting as a guard, she was out climbing trees and swinging her sword, constantly putting her all into her workouts. With a break period coming up, Ai Fa was showing some serious drive to get back to work before it arrived.

Then, once Ai Fa was back to normal, it would be time for the bout with Lem

Dom. Would she succeed in defeating Ai Fa in a contest of strength, with her future as a hunter on the line? Well, regardless of the result, her days of helping out with prep work for our business would soon come to an end.

“Now that I think about it, weren’t the leading clan heads invited to the castle town today too?” Yun Sudra suddenly asked, tirelessly staring out the window.

“Yeah, but they’re coming later, and to a different location entirely, so we won’t be seeing them.”

Today was the day that came once every three months, when the leading clan heads were summoned so that their reward money could be handed over to them. This would be the second such time this had happened since Melfried had taken over from Cyclaeus as the arbitrator between the castle and the people of the forest’s edge.

Ever since Melfried had taken on the role, it had become an event not only for handing over money, but also for both sides to formally discuss their complaints and requests. I was honestly a little curious about what sort of topics would be brought up this time around.

I guess first up will be the matter of reconciliation with the house of Saturas. And I wonder if our side will bring up the thing with the Gamley Troupe.

At any rate, I prayed that the bond between Genos and the forest’s edge would only grow stronger.

Oh, and Darmu Ruu and Gazraan Rutim were both going to accompany them. Darmu Ruu would be serving as Donda Ruu’s attendant, while Gazraan Rutim would be joining in as a special advisor. The Rutim clan head had displayed his skills as a negotiator during the matter with Cyclaeus, so he had been invited to join in this meeting as well.

Whenever the head of a main house had to step away from hunting work, the next clan head would take charge of that task. That obviously meant Jiza Ruu in the case of the Ruu clan, but the Rutim clan head was still a young man and didn’t have a child yet, so that meant some other close relative had to fill in... For the Rutim clan, that meant the second son of the main house, apparently.



“The Fou and Beim clan heads will be going too, right? I’m really looking forward to hearing about it when they get back,” Yun Sudra said.

“That’s for sure. But we may actually be the last ones to arrive back to the settlement. After all, we have a lot of work on our hands,” I noted.

Inspecting new ingredients wasn’t our only task for the day. I also needed to explain the recipe for my black fuwano dipping soba to the chefs of the castle town, and on top of that, we had made arrangements to have Varkas try some cooking made by Myme, Reina and Sheera Ruu, and me, so our schedule was going to be pretty packed. It was currently half past the lower first hour, and the leading clan heads wouldn’t be having their meeting until the lower third hour, but I still strongly suspected that it would take us longer to get back.

“We closed the stalls early today, so we’ve got to make sure this trip is worthwhile. But I’d say that meeting with Varkas and the others and hearing their opinions will be pretty valuable by itself.”

“Yeah. The customers in the post town sure did look disappointed,” Yun Sudra replied with a giggle, making her gray-brown side ponytail sway.

We had closed up shop an hour earlier than usual. Actually, we had originally planned on taking the day off entirely, but that had *really* made our customers protest.

The folks who came to visit Genos for the revival festival would generally stay and rest until the third of the silver month, then head back home or to a different town. But even now on the fifth, a fair number of them were still around.

“You just took the day off, and now you’re going to do it again?!”

“I was planning to enjoy your food on my way out of Genos tomorrow! This is ridiculous!”

Faced with a deluge of such complaints, we had refrained from skipping work after all, instead staying open until we came as close to the end of our usual business hours as possible.

Though the number of customers we got was decreasing day by day, we were

still selling over a thousand meals each time we opened. On the first business day of the new year in particular, we'd had to close up way ahead of schedule because we had run out of food. Even with the revival festival over, it seemed we couldn't let our guards down until all the visitors had finally left.

"Ah, looks like we're here!" Yun Sudra excitedly proclaimed as the totos-drawn carriage finally came to a stop.

The door in the rear swung open, and a soldier who had been assigned to escort us peered inside.

"We have been anticipating your arrival. Please take care when stepping down."

Following the soldier's instructions, we stepped down into the stone-paved inner garden. Reina Ruu's group and the hunters guarding them were also exiting the carriage beside us, with Ludo Ruu being one of them. "Huh? There sure do seem to be a lot of soldiers around today. Is there a reason for that?" the young hunter asked.

"Indeed. There are a great many noble guests currently staying at this manor, so security is especially strict."

"Hmm. There weren't nearly this many the last time we came here, though."

When I looked around, I found that he was right. There were roughly ten or so guards scattered around in the inner garden. Two of them had been assigned to be our guides, but were the rest of them there because of us too?

They looked to be dressed and equipped a little differently than the usual soldiers guarding the manor. Instead of being armed with ornamental spears, they each had two blades hanging by their hips, one long and one short. Their neat and trim uniforms included chest plates and bracers with emblems on them, and appeared to be both lightweight and highly practical.

They were most likely members of the militia. Now that their corrupt previous leader, Ciluel, had been replaced, we could be sure they weren't a threat to us, but we didn't often see them around, which made them feel strangely imposing. I also noticed that Ludo Ruu was appraising the soldiers with a doubtful look in his eyes, probably thinking the same thing I was.

“Do you have some sort of special guest here today? Asuta and the others are only supposed to be meeting with Polarth, right?”

“We’re simply following the orders of our superiors...” the young soldier hesitantly replied, right before a middle-aged soldier who looked to be a little higher in rank came rushing over.

“Why, if it isn’t our guests from the forest’s edge. Please, allow us to guide you in.”

“Before we do that, could I get an answer to my question? I’m responsible for the safety of our chefs, after all.”

Jiza and Darmu Ruu were both absent, so as the youngest son of the main house, Ludo Ruu was in charge here. He repeated his question, and the older soldier nodded with an “Ah...” before leaning in close. “Lord Polarth of the house of Daleim said that he wishes to discuss that matter with you directly. He has already arrived, so please, come this way...”

Though his response wasn’t exactly concerning, it did feel evasive. However, after sending a silent signal to the other hunters with his eyes, Ludo Ruu did follow the soldier inside as requested.

“What’s going on? This feels different than usual,” I whispered to Ai Fa.

She quietly nodded back to me. “Indeed. I do have some idea as to what might be going on, but if Polarth is going to offer us an explanation, then we should simply wait to hear it.”

Ai Fa was more cautious by nature than Ludo Ruu, so hearing her say that really put me at ease. It meant that nothing had set off her danger sensor just yet.

As we stepped into the building, we were greeted by a line of pages, just like last time. The servants then silently took possession of the luggage we offered them.

After that, we headed to the bathhouse, with an astounding ten guards crowding around in order to accompany us. It was clear now that something was off. Did they think they needed to provide us with more protection after that incident between Geimalos and Shin Ruu or something?

But the house of Saturas is supposed to be trying to make peace with us. I can't imagine Leeheim or anyone else in his family ignoring Marstein's will and trying to do us harm at this point...

At any rate, for now we just needed to meet up with Polarth as soon as possible, so we hurriedly cleansed our bodies and then headed for the kitchen.

"Ah, I've been waiting for all of you from the forest's edge. I am truly glad we were able to reunite so soon." Polarth greeted us with a smile just inside the kitchen. I could see a few chefs farther in as well. Polarth had a pair of soldiers stationed beside him, just like always, and as he stood there with his usual bright and cheerful smile, I stepped forward to speak as the representative for our group.

"Sorry for the wait. So, is anything going on?"

"Well, we're just seeing to some preparatory work here...but first and foremost, I believe I owe you all an explanation." On Polarth's order, the door was shut, leaving Dan Rutim and a hunter whose name I didn't know outside the kitchen with the ten soldiers. "There have been quite a few men on guard duty today, haven't there? I hope that you haven't found their presence unsettling."

"All I want to know is why you've got so many of them around. Is today some sort of special day?" Ludo Ruu asked.

However, Polarth just shook his head, "Not at all. There's nothing special about it in the least. The nobles staying here in the manor are all spending their time relaxing and reminiscing about the revival festival. However, they did put in a request that security be tightened..."

"Okay, so what's their deal? Are they connected to those Saturas guys in some way?"

"No, they have all traveled here from other lands. This manor is where we host our noble guests, after all. Put simply, the issue is that they are anxious about the presence of hunters from the forest's edge armed with blades."

So those soldiers were here not to guard us, but to guard others *from* us?

Still smiling brightly, Polarth lowered his voice a bit and said, "You people of

the forest's edge are honest and virtuous, so would you allow me to speak directly as well? You see, news of the incident from the other day has reached the ears of those staying here, and has caused them to become a bit uneasy. They've started thinking that the soldiers we have on guard duty would be of no use whatsoever if any hunters from the forest's edge felt like making some sort of trouble."

"Huh? We have no reason to just go around attacking random strangers."

"That much is obvious. However, visitors from elsewhere may have all manner of worries, and unlike us, they haven't actually met any people of the forest's edge," Polarth said, his smile growing even brighter. "And, well, nobles and wealthy merchants tend to be cowards. Increasing the number of guards to ten wouldn't change a thing if they were forced to deal with hunters from the forest's edge, but it's a small price to pay to put our guests at ease."

"You're a noble too, aren't you? You don't feel scared at all, even when faced with this many hunters?"

"That is because I trust you. But the nobles of Genos have betrayed your trust twice now, with all of Cyclopeus's iniquity and Sir Geimalos's deceit from the other day. On the other hand, you people of the forest's edge have not broken the law in the castle town even once. In light of all that, how could we possibly harbor doubts about your earnestness at this point?"

Ludo Ruu finally looked satisfied and grinned back at Polarth. "Sorry for making such a fuss, then. It's just that my old man left me in charge of the guards."

"Think nothing of it. We are the ones acting rudely, so it is only natural for you to feel cautious. But this kitchen is the most suitable for what we will be doing today, so we couldn't exactly switch to a different location," Polarth replied, gesturing behind him. "Now then, why don't we collect ourselves and get started? Could we ask you to begin by instructing our chefs on the dish in question, Sir Asuta?"

"Yes, of course."

We followed Polarth as he walked toward the middle of the room, where a whole fifteen chefs stood waiting. Six of them I recognized: Yang, the head chef

of the house of Daleim; Timalo, the head chef of Selva's Spear; and Varkas's apprentices, Bozl, Tatumai, Shilly Rou, and Roy.

"Welcome, Sir Asuta. Would you allow us to observe as well?" asked Bozl, Varkas's large apprentice from Jagar.

"Of course. Actually, is Varkas still not here yet?"

"He is not. It seems he wishes to avoid seeing too much of how this dish is prepared, as he does not want it to influence him when he is making shaska."

In the near future, Varkas was planning to start offering a dish from Sym called shaska, which was apparently some kind of noodle. I was really curious about what sort of dish it might be.

Bozl then turned to Myme with a bright smile. "Ahh, it has been some time since I last saw you, though... Do you perhaps remember me?" he asked, and the young girl quickly bowed her head. One time, when Bozl had come to the post town on business, they had come across one another at the stalls.

"Yes! You're one of Varkas's apprentices, correct? When Asuta told me later, I was really surprised."

Bozl and Myme smiled at one another. They were both pretty friendly and sociable people. Meanwhile, Roy and Shilly Rou were observing from off to the side.

Roy had tasted Myme's cooking once before, so he must have known she wasn't someone he could ignore. Shilly Rou was staring at Myme with a gaze that was just as intense as the one she had sent my way when we had first met. It seemed she had heard about Myme's reputation from Bozl, and was now fully alert and laser-focused on the young chef.

"Aside from Sir Varkas's apprentices, all of these chefs run shops in the castle town. I would like you to begin by teaching them how to make your black fuwano dipping soba," Polarth stated.

"Right." I nodded to him.

The majority of the chefs in front of me were middle-aged men, with Timalo front and center. I couldn't help but tense up at the thought that I needed to

act as an instructor for such a dignified group.

“This is Sir Asuta of the Fa clan, a chef from the forest’s edge. He has been helping us find a good way to sell the black fuwano Genos is purchasing from Banarm. As you have already been told, he comes from overseas and knows cooking techniques unheard of here in Genos. We wish to have all of you adopt these techniques and work to create your own delicious fuwano dishes.”

All of the chefs were clad in white or light-gray attire, and though their faces weren’t showing much emotion, they all bowed to me.

I had continued developing not only the black fuwano dipping soba, but also the condiments using white mamaria vinegar. However, they apparently didn’t need any lessons on the latter, since they were already working with them. I was definitely curious to know what they thought about learning from and copying me, but all of us were here doing this because the nobles had directly requested it of us. We didn’t have much choice but to devote ourselves to the task at hand.

“I’m Asuta of the Fa clan, a person of the forest’s edge. As you can see, I’m still inexperienced myself, so I’m sure I’ll come up short in a variety of ways. But even so, I look forward to working with you. Why don’t we go ahead and get right to work?”

The necessary ingredients had already been gathered at my work station. Polarth had even made arrangements to have a supply of poitan flour available, since it wasn’t usually stocked in this kitchen.

I had Toor Deen prepare a sample, as she was the most skilled at making noodles. The idea was that she would demonstrate the method, they would follow along, and I would offer detailed advice. The other women would act as assistants, helping to divide up and distribute the necessary ingredients.

As Myme was just a guest and Sufira Zaza just an observer, they moved to stand off to the side next to the hunters and watched us as we worked. Polarth and Varkas’s apprentices did the same. With all eyes on us, we started with the first step of preparing the dough.

“You want four parts of black fuwano to one part poitan, and an amount of water equal to about half the weight of your solid ingredients. You can use

these bowls to roughly measure everything out.”

“Four parts black fuwano, one part poitan, and half the weight of the solid ingredients in water, correct?” a voice suddenly called out from behind me, causing me to turn that way in surprise. A fairly young man was standing there holding a large wooden plank like a drawing board.

“Um, what are you doing, exactly?”

“Ah, yes. My job is to write down your instructions on how to prepare this dish.”

Looking carefully, I noticed a stiff piece of paper like papyrus was stretched out across the board, and the man was holding a writing brush. At his hip, he had a wooden tube filled with black ink. These were tools we didn’t see very often in the post town. Actually, writing only seemed to be used there for shop signs and wanted posters.

I see... I was a little worried about whether I’d be able to get the recipe across properly in a single day, but if they’re taking notes, that’s a big relief.

A written recipe explaining the amounts, the heating time, and any other necessary details would ease the burden on the chefs quite a bit.

Actually, I’m getting kinda jealous. If the women of the forest’s edge could take notes like that too, we could have everyone learn recipes way quicker.

Would it be possible to introduce that to the forest’s edge as well? Using a knife to carve text into a plank would certainly work. If I could just learn the west’s letters and numbers, then we could leave accurate records of not just my recipes, but Sheera’s and Reina Ruu’s too for future generations to enjoy.

Learning to write would definitely be huge. If everyone from the forest’s edge is interested, we could take our time trying to figure it out, I thought to myself while continuing with my lecture.

We added the water and kneaded the resulting dough, then while it was resting, we set about preparing the soup base. We made our stock using dried fish and seaweed, which needed to boil for a while. As we were waiting for it to finish, though, Tatumai leaned in and whispered to me, “The soup you prepare is wonderfully delicious, Sir Asuta. However, dried fish and seaweed are scarce

ingredients that have to be delivered from the western capital. If this many chefs were to try to make use of them, we would eventually run short, would we not?"

Tatumi was one of Varkas's apprentices, an older chef with eastern blood. He was apparently a westerner, but he was always expressionless like an easterner, and his solemnity made his words seem to carry a lot of weight.

Polarth turned to look at Tatumi with eyes opened wide. "But only Sir Varkas and Sir Asuta have been using those ingredients, so we still have a mountain of them we need to do something about. There doesn't seem to be much risk of them going bad, but if they could be used up, it would actually be a big help to us. And if we do end up needing a lot more, we can simply increase the amount we order."

A calm gleam in his eyes, Tatumi replied, "However, ingredients from the capital are only delivered once or twice a year at most, correct? If you request more, it will still take several months to a year for them to arrive, and there is no guarantee you will be able to secure what you need."

"That's a perfectly reasonable opinion. The most important thing on our end, though, is finding a way to use up these ingredients rather than letting them go bad," Polarth replied, his smile turning into an uncharacteristically awkward one. "It is the house of Turan that purchases ingredients from the capital, as well as the house of Duke Genos, which has now assumed half of the burden. If Varkas wishes to monopolize those ingredients, he will need to negotiate with the merchants from the capital himself."

Tatumi silently bowed and stepped back. He must have been speaking as a proxy for Varkas, who didn't want to see precious ingredients wasted.

"Well, we have already greatly increased the amount of herbs from Sym and tau oil from Jagar that we have been ordering. This is ultimately all for the sake of enriching Genos, so if it becomes necessary, I am sure we'll be able to strike a deal to procure any ingredient that might be required."

Polarth was definitely head and shoulders above the rest of us when it came to considering the big picture. Actually, Varkas seemed like he would prefer not to pay attention to things like that at all, and instead focus his passion solely on

the pursuit of delicious food. That single-minded focus definitely moved me, but I couldn't agree with Varkas's opinion that scarce ingredients were better off going bad than being used in poor cooking, so I held my tongue.

"If we run out of dried fish and seaweed, then we simply need to use other ingredients to make something just as good. In fact, I believe we should experiment with our own soup flavorings regardless," Timalo chimed in. He was an older chef who saw Varkas as a rival. "To do otherwise would diminish our pride as chefs. After all, we are not Sir Asuta's apprentices."

"Yes, that is indeed a very reasonable opinion as well," Polarth said with a calm nod before looking my way. I smiled back at him, continuing to give instructions all the while.

"I see it the same way as Timalo. The idea here is to determine how we can make black fuwano into something delicious, so I don't think there's any need to mimic the flavor of my soup broth too," I said.

"Hmm. So you're saying there is no need to fixate on using dried fish and seaweed?" Polarth asked.

"Of course there isn't. I was born in an island nation, so we were never short on fish or seaweed, and because of that, this was the most common type of stock we used. Cooking develops based on what a land is abundant in, so I think it's only natural for Genos to come up with recipes that are all its own."

"I see," Polarth replied, looking convinced. But despite the fact that his opinion on the matter had been accepted, Timalo didn't look all that happy.

Well, he's being forced by the elites to cook something other than what he wants to. I can certainly see why he wouldn't be pleased with that as a chef.

Still, hopefully he could use this dish as a springboard to come up with something even more delicious. Timalo would surely be able to come up with some unique creations that were very well suited to Genos.

I'd be really happy if I could just see noodles take root here in Genos.

Thanks to Timalo, the final doubt that had been plaguing me had been wiped away.

This was a job I had taken on as a sort of apology to Welhide and the people of Banarm. But while we, the people of the forest's edge, might have felt that we owed them something, along the way, Timalo and the others had ended up having this giant hassle thrust upon them, which I felt kind of bad about, though I hadn't let anyone know.

If the nobles ordered them to do something, they couldn't possibly turn the job down. No doubt, they were less than thrilled about having a kid like me giving them cooking lessons too. But if their pride as chefs made them want to revise my black fuwano dipping soba, or perhaps if it pushed them to come up with entirely new black fuwano dishes that were even more delicious, that would be good for everyone involved.

That was how I felt as I watched all those chefs working with such serious expressions on their faces.

2

Roughly ninety minutes passed after that, during which the black fuwano dipping soba was completed without a hitch. We had also made a variety of tempura in that time too, though not too much. The folks who had tried them were now enthusiastically sharing their opinions with one another.

"This is such a strange dish."

"I never imagined fuwano could be eaten like this. The noodles are a little difficult to handle, however."

"But it truly is delicious. And it seems to pair quite well with this fried dish."

The few people who had tried my soba before, such as Yang, were quietly observing those who were trying it for the first time. Shilly Rou was currently absent, though, as she had left to summon Varkas, since we would be inspecting the freshly delivered ingredients after this.

As we were waiting for Varkas to arrive, the chefs continued discussing the food in detail.

"Does this texture come from how the ingredients are heated separately rather than all together?"

“I believe the long and thin shape plays a major role in creating that texture. However, the way it is heated for only a short period of time must also be kept in mind... Hmm. I suppose I will need to do a fair bit of experimenting before I can say so definitively, though.”

“Well, this is made using fuwano from Banarm, and it’s been combined with an ingredient as unfamiliar to us as poitan on top of that, so half of my experience with this sort of thing is probably going to be completely useless.”

Polarth had also eaten his portion of the test dish, which had been prepared by Toor Deen, and after listening to their discussion with a look of satisfaction for a while, he eventually clapped his hands and loudly stated, “Now then, that concludes Sir Asuta’s lesson for today. What did you all think? I am an amateur when it comes to cooking, so I haven’t the slightest idea how long it will take to master this technique.”

Yang stepped forward to speak for the group of chefs. “None of the steps are particularly difficult, so there should be no further need to trouble Sir Asuta for his assistance. Now we simply need to spend time experimenting to come up with some delicious dishes of our own.”

“I am glad to hear it. After all, I would feel quite bad about having to keep summoning Sir Asuta here to the castle town again and again. Do the rest of you have any objections?”

It seemed none of them did.

Somehow, I got the feeling that the chefs all had sharper looks in their eyes now than they previously had before the taste testing, as if they wanted to hurry back to their own kitchens to give it a try. However, Polarth was smiling brightly at them in a way that seemed to be meant to calm them back down.

“Well then, the next task at hand is examining the new ingredients. This is yet another big job, just as important as the black fuwano dish. During the revival festival, a great many merchant groups visited Genos, and thanks to them, the pantry here has received deliveries of a large variety of ingredients that it had previously been lacking. It seems the previous Count Turan truly did make business deals with every place you can imagine.”

The chefs looked deadly serious as they listened to his words. Though he was

just the second son, Polarth was still a member of the main bloodline of the house of Daleim. Normally, someone like him would never even set foot in a kitchen.

“Those among you who have never been associates of the house of Turan will likely not have much knowledge of how to utilize these ingredients, so I would like to ask Sir Varkas and Sir Timalo to explain some things about them for us. It seems a good number of them are difficult to handle, but the novelty they provide will surely be most pleasing to the people of the castle town. Duke Marstein Genos himself has said that he wishes to ensure that these precious ingredients will not be allowed to go bad, and that the previous count’s wicked dealings should be utilized to instead bring happiness to the people.”

Unsurprisingly, the chefs just silently bowed in response. Polarth was acting the same as always, but all these people showing such deference to him made him seem a lot more like a noble. It all felt really weird to watch.

As that pointless thought was passing through my head, the door to the kitchen swung open from the outside. Shilly Rou had returned with Varkas.

“My apologies for the wait...”

“Ah, Sir Varkas. Well then, I shall go ahead and leave the rest to you. I have already given a basic explanation.”

“Understood...”

Varkas stood there before us, looking rather listless.

Timalo, meanwhile, puffed up his chest and walked over beside him.

“So you have finally arrived. I am sure you must be rather displeased, being forced to stand here beside me, Sir Varkas.”

“Not at all...”

“They simply concluded that you would likely not be able to do this on your own. After all, you would hate to see anyone snatch the goods in the pantry here away from you. It may be disrespectful to say this, but how much of a difference is there, really, between that and the previous count’s desire to monopolize rare ingredients?”

“I cannot say what my previous employer’s feelings might have been, but I simply do not wish to see precious ingredients wasted,” Varkas said with a small sigh. His pale face, which had a look about it that made it hard to guess his age, wasn’t showing any emotion to speak of, and yet he still looked somehow downhearted.

Timalo snorted, “Hmph,” then jerked his chin toward Shilly Rou and the others who were standing by off to the side. “Well then, would you mind asking your apprentices to bring out the ingredients? We have limited time to work with, after all.”

Unsurprisingly, Shilly Rou shot Timalo a piercing glare, but the other three politely bowed and then turned to go. I suspected they had been Varkas’s apprentices at least as far back as when he had worked at this manor. Roy had worked here too, even if it was in a different role, so they must have all known Timalo for a long time.

At any rate, the four of them went ahead and brought out a variety of different ingredients. Though the chefs from the forest’s edge had been silent for some time, I could see the clear anticipation on their faces.

“We will begin with the ingredients from Jagar. These are hoboi seeds and tau beans, this is keru root, these are sheema, ma pula, and ma gigo, and lastly we have nyatta sparkling wine and spirits,” Timalo said.

The daikon-like sheema, paprika-like ma pula, and taro-like ma gigo were already familiar to me, but the rest were complete unknowns. I started to check them out as I pondered what sort of ingredients they were. I saw that keru root was a white root vegetable shaped like ginseng. But as for the hoboi seeds and tau beans, they had been brought out in bags, so I wasn’t able to get a look at them just yet, and the two types of alcohol were both sealed in bottles.

“Sheema, ma pula, and ma gigo have been available in the pantry for a while now, but they haven’t seen much circulation yet in the castle town, so we’re including them in this presentation to be on the safe side. Do any of you need us to speak about them?”

“Yes, that would be appreciated.” Around half of the chefs replied along those lines. Four months had passed now since the ingredients that were constantly

being delivered to this manor's pantry had been released onto the market, but apparently some of their businesses hadn't had an opportunity to get their hands on any yet.

"As their names imply, ma pula and ma gigo are subspecies of pula and gigo. These ingredients come not only from Jagar, but also the western part of Selva. Ma pula isn't bitter like pula, while ma gigo lacks the stickiness of gigo. If you think about them like that, it should not be difficult to apply them to existing recipes."

"Then what about sheema? It seems to have a rather odd shape for a vegetable."

"Sheema is a vegetable only grown in Jagar. It can be eaten raw, but frying it in tau oil and the like is more common."

I had already heard all of this from Mikel. Sheema was an ingredient similar to daikon, but its skin looked just like a sponge gourd.

"These vegetables have already been circulating to a limited extent within the castle town. My understanding is that they have only been available to a very limited number of businesses, since the large merchant groups have exclusively been doing business through the house of Turan. However, it has already been some time since they were unveiled at a previous gathering like this one, is that not so, Sir Varkas?"

Timalo's question went unanswered.

"Thanks to the efforts of Sir Asuta and Sir Yang, these vegetables are already seeing quite a bit of use in the post town. Taking that into consideration, it feels rather strange that a number of chefs in the castle town are still unfamiliar with how to use them. Explaining such things should hardly have been a difficult task, would you not agree?"

It seemed Timalo was willing to even go as far as raising me up if it meant being able to criticize Varkas at the same time. There was some serious animosity between the two of them.

Also, I hadn't heard anything about that "previous gathering." Did that mean they had held a gathering here in the castle town to unveil ingredients before?

And Varkas had been assigned the role of speaker, but he hadn't given a proper explanation because of his desire to monopolize the ingredients? Timalo's statements all made sense when I looked at them from that perspective.

Varkas sure is a sinful man.

If Yang and I had failed to popularize those ingredients in the post town, they could well have been left to rot in the pantry instead. Torst's excessive gratitude toward us might not have been so exaggerated after all, with that in mind.

"Now then, let us move on to the hoboi seeds, tau beans, and keru root. It is no exaggeration to say that these ingredients have only ever been available to the house of Count Turan, so this should be the first time those of you who have not worked in this manor have seen them."

I had never seen Timalo so lively. It seemed this role suited his personality quite well. It just went to show how important it was to assign the right person to any given task.

"Hoboi seeds may prove to be somewhat difficult to handle. Though they are unlikely to ruin the flavor of a dish, they are also quite tricky to utilize effectively."

With that, Timalo dumped out the contents of one of the bags onto a wooden plate, and sounds of bewilderment spread throughout the crowd. They certainly looked like little seeds, only around two millimeters in size each.

"Are these...something similar to the seeds from Sym that are used to add fragrance?"

"That is correct. If you grind them down, they will give off a sweet aroma. I often employ these hoboi seeds in soup dishes alongside karon milk and milk fat," Timalo replied with a nod, handing the plate to the nearest chef. "These have already been heated through, so please, go ahead and see what you think of their flavor and scent. They may seem insignificant at first, but these hoboi seeds are bursting with nutrition. In Jagar, anyone and everyone would be happy to have them in their meal."

The chefs began sniffing and biting the little seeds, but they still all looked befuddled. Their expressions made it clear that they were uncertain about how

exactly they would employ such an ingredient in their cooking.

Finally, the plate made it over to us, and we were able to smell and taste the seeds for ourselves... Right away, I became the first person to get excited about this new ingredient. “Ah, this is great. If they aren’t too expensive, I would love to purchase some.”

“Oh?” Timalo said as he turned my way. “They should cost about the same amount as chitt seeds by weight. Still, are you truly confident you can make use of them in your cooking?”

“Definitely. There was an ingredient a lot like this back in my home country, after all.”

These hoboi seeds had a very similar flavor to sesame seeds. They were akin to white sesame seeds, or maybe golden ones, with a sweet yet gentle taste. The way you could easily bite through them meant they could provide some pleasant texture too.

“It’s true that it would be difficult to make a dish where their flavor comes through clearly, unlike most herbs from Sym, but I think I could apply them to all sorts of recipes. Oh, and is it possible to get oil out of these seeds?”

“Oil? Why do you ask?”

“That was the main way they were used back in my home country. But, well, if they only taste similar and don’t have much oil content, then I guess it wouldn’t be possible to use them that way.”

“No, in the south of Jagar they use just as much hoboi oil as reten oil. And there’s not much difference in how they’re made either,” Bozl chimed in, as he was a southerner. “I was born in the north of Jagar, so I haven’t had it often myself, but I recall it being a most flavorful kind of oil.”

“Really? It would make me very happy if we could use hoboi oil here in Genos too.”

More than the sesame seeds themselves, sesame oil would greatly expand the breadth of what I could make. I was actually pushing ahead with a number of Chinese dishes even now, but a lot of them felt lacking without sesame oil.

“Well, if they are used that way in Jagar, then it may be interesting to give it a try...” Timalo replied, sounding a little evasive. But then he got back on track and loudly declared, “Now then, next we have tau beans! As you may have assumed from the name, this is the ingredient from which tau oil is made. They have a weak flavor, so they can prove difficult to utilize.”

At that, the ingredient in question was dumped out onto a fresh plate for us. They were round, with each being about the size of the nail on my thumb. And since they were pure white and shiny, they looked a lot like soybeans.

“So tau oil is made from these beans? They’re an entirely different color, though, and I cannot pick up much of a smell from them,” someone said.

“Tau oil is made with a process known as fermentation, which you are likely not especially familiar with here in Genos. Sym and Jagar have many locations where the average temperature is higher than in Genos, so they had to come up with this rather unusual technique in order to preserve certain foods effectively. Oh, and these have not been heated through, so they cannot be eaten right now. If I had to pick something to compare them to, it would have to be fuwano,” Timalo explained.

“Fuwano? Then, do you grind them into flour?”

“No. If you boil them as is, they will grow soft, and then you can eat them. Whether you leave them in their original shape or mash them is a matter of personal taste, but in parts of Jagar and Sym, they are eaten in place of fuwano.”

Timalo then looked over at Tatumai, and the man stepped forward.

“Fuwano and shaska are staple foods in Sym, but as I understand it, tau beans are eaten in the southwest, where the crops needed to make shaska are difficult to grow.”

“Ah, in Jagar it’s the northeast. In other words, they’re eaten a lot in the area where the battles with Sym tend to happen,” Bozl noted.

I was a little shocked for a moment when I heard Bozl just outright say that, but Tatumai seemed indifferent to the comment, despite his heritage. Well, in the end, he was a citizen of the west, so he didn’t have any stake in the war

between the south and east. His wrinkled face remained expressionless as he quietly regarded the tau beans.

“They do not have a strong flavor, so if you think about them as you would fuwano, it should be simple to find a use for them. Now then, lastly, we have keru root,” Timalo said.

The root vegetable had a strange, winding shape to it. Using a vegetable knife that was sitting on the workstation, Timalo swiftly chopped it up into fine pieces.

“They have an incredibly strong flavor and aroma. You should approach using them the same as you would with herbs from Sym.”

Everyone took a pinch to smell and taste, but when Rimee Ruu reached out to take her own small helping and tossed it into her mouth, she let out a choked shriek. “Gyah! Spicy! It reminds me of raw myamuu!”



“It’s true. Though the flavor is quite different, the spiciness does seem to be comparable to that of myamuu,” Yang agreed from elsewhere in the crowd.

Sure enough, it had an intense smell and flavor, just like everyone had said. I had only put a small amount of the finely chopped root in my mouth, but I was struck by a sharp tingling sensation. It definitely seemed like something best used as a seasoning, in the same vein as the garlic-like myamuu and several other herbs I had encountered.

Still, it has a rather refreshing aftertaste. I sort of feel like it’s kinda similar to ginger. In that case, I expected it would pair well with giba meat.

As I was thinking that, Timalo asked me, “What do you think, Sir Asuta? I hear that your skill with herbs is impressive enough to even astonish Sir Varkas. So, will you be able to properly utilize an ingredient with as strong a flavor as keru root?”

“Well, for now I’d like to check its compatibility with tau oil, sugar, and fruit wine. And it may be suitable as a condiment for the black fuwano dipping soba everyone tried before too,” I said.

Timalo’s eyes shot open wide in surprise. “How precise... Sir Asuta, was there an ingredient similar to this one as well in your home country?”

“Huh? Ah, yes. At least, I believe it may be rather similar. I’m also curious about how it would pair with myamuu.”

If my hunch was accurate, this would help me bring our myamuu giba closer to my ideal flavor, as it was based on ginger pork originally. I was probably even happier to get my hands on this keru root than I was about the hoboi seeds and tau beans.

“That just leaves the nyatta sparkling wine and spirits. They’ve been selling quite poorly so far, since Genos is rather fond of its mamaria wine, but southern chefs will sometimes simmer meat in them, so perhaps they can be used in the same way here.”

I was already familiar with the sparkling wine, but it cost more than mamaria fruit wine and didn’t have all that strong of a taste, so I had ended up not using it. Naudis employed it as a marinade to make the meat he cooked nice and

tender, which *was* a practical use for it, certainly. However, the price had proved to be too much of an issue in the end.

The nyatta spirits, on the other hand, turned out to be quite flavorful, even though both were made from the same ingredients. I didn't drink, but I felt like it had a sweet and mellow aroma similar to that of refined sake. Even if I didn't plan to use it as the core of a dish, I could see it improving the flavor of our cubed giba meat stew and meat and chatchi stew.

"That concludes the ingredients from Jagar. You should all take some of each back with you and experiment with making use of them. Sir Varkas, do you have anything that you wish to add?"

"No, not particularly..."

"If you don't wish for ingredients to be wasted, then would it not be wise to take the initiative and offer advice?"

"It isn't as if they could achieve the same taste even if they use the same methods as I do, and it is only natural that each chef has their own unique way of utilizing ingredients... Your explanation of how these ingredients are used and their backgrounds was sufficient, Sir Timalo, so I have nothing to add," Varkas halfheartedly replied.

In response, Timalo shrugged and said, "I see. But after this, we have the ingredients from Sym. You possess more knowledge on herbs and the like than anyone, Sir Varkas, so surely you cannot remain silent now."

That comment received no response.

"Well then, please bring out the ingredients from Sym," Timalo instructed Varkas's apprentices, who once again disappeared into the pantry.

When they returned, they were holding a colorful assortment of herbs. The various scents were jumbled all together and struck my nose with quite a bit of force.

"Starting from the right, you have ira, shishi, nafua, and yural. The meat is smoked gyama. In this jar we have gyama horn. And then lastly, this is charred ramuria."

“Ramuria? Is that the name of an animal rather than an herb?”

“Yes. It is apparently a type of red snake that lives on the plains of Sym.”

The word “snake” alone was enough to cause the chefs to go pale. Someone even staggered backward in response.

“They eat snakes in Sym? What a terribly repulsive custom...”

“Even in Sym, they are not well liked as an ingredient. However, charred ramuria is highly nutritious. There should also still be ramuria steeped in wine back in the pantry,” Varkas stated, turning toward Polarth. “Lord Polarth, gyama horns and charred ramuria are considered to be more like medicine than food in the east. It would require several years of training to utilize them in cooking. If you make a mistake with the amount you use, they can even be poisonous, so I believe it would be best for you to refrain from trying to sell them in town.”

“I see. In that case, we shall refrain from using those two ingredients. It is not as if an excess of either gets delivered,” Polarth said.

“You have my thanks...” Varkas replied. Though he remained expressionless, he looked quite relieved.

And so, that left the four varieties of herbs and the smoked gyama meat. The smoked meat had been cut into flat strips that reminded me of beef jerky. They were reddish-brown and looked a bit blackened, but I also spied a fair number of white lines of fat.

“We have fresh kimyuus and karon meat in Genos, so wouldn’t it be quite unusual for anyone to be interested in eating smoked meat? And the price is around double that of karon...” Timalo said.

“Yes, but one of the other chefs here may still be able to find a way to make something good with it. Whether they use it or not should be up to each individual chef to decide. I believe we should have everyone take a slice back with them to start,” Polarth countered.

“I suppose...”

“And that reminds me, there are some live gyama in the pens in the rear, are there not? That was certainly a surprise to see.”

Varkas almost seemed pained as he narrowed his eyes and took a step closer to Polarth. “Those gyama were specially delivered here on my personal request. The merchant group that brought them here is the only one in all of Sym that can deliver live gyama. They only visit Genos twice a year, and have said it is difficult to transport more than ten at a time. I can make use of all of them myself with no issues, so there is no need for anyone else to be brought in to deal with them...”

“But the house of Turan is in charge of paying for their feed while they are still alive, correct?”

“I will compensate them for that personally. And I can have a gyama pen built for them at my own house if I must.”

I didn’t think I had ever seen Varkas so flustered. Though his expression remained indecipherable, he was talking a bit quicker than usual, so I was pretty sure I was reading him right. In the face of his agitation, even Polarth had to let out a bit of an astounded chuckle.

“Very well. Then you shall take charge of the feed for the gyama and pay for the servants who have been tasked with looking after them. Does anyone else here wish to handle gyama meat badly enough to take on the same burden?”

Not a single chef replied.

However, I went ahead and raised my hand, then said, “Um...I specialize in giba meat, so I have no need for gyama meat, but would it be possible for us to see a live one? I’d like to know what they look like, since I’ve only ever seen a stuffed gyama head.”

“Yes, that would of course be fine. Don’t you agree, Sir Varkas?”

“Indeed, as long as you are simply looking.” At that, Varkas let out a heavy sigh, as if he had just finished a difficult task.

Glancing at the master chef out of the corner of his eye, Polarth brought a hand up to his plump cheek. “Still, a merchant group that can transport ten gyama... Sir Varkas, were you perhaps referring to the Black Flight Feathers?”

“Yes. The previous Count Turan had dealings with them going back seven years, I believe.”

“Ah, I see,” Polarth stated, glancing our way. However, he didn’t say anything further before turning his gaze back toward Varkas. “Well then, we shall have each of the chefs take some smoked gyama meat back with them, so could you offer an explanation on the herbs?”

“Yes... Ira strengthens the pumping of the heart, shishi promotes stomach and intestinal function, nafua helps with throat pain, and yural is said to weaken the potency of poisons.”

Varkas stopped talking at that point, causing Timalo to interject, “Er... Those are their medicinal effects. What we wish to know is how they can be used in cooking.”

“Ira will quickly break down when placed directly over flames, so it is not suitable for being used as a potherb. And when yural is heated, the aroma soon vanishes.”

Silence fell over the room.

“As I said, Sir Varkas...”

“How much more do you expect me to explain? I always utilize a great many herbs together, and each chef must use their own skills to determine how to pair them and in which amounts, is that not so?”

Timalo did not seem to know what to say in response.

“If you are asking me to reveal everything, I am willing to do so, but the combinations and quantities vary by dish. Before I can tell you all of that, you will first need an understanding of each of the more than twenty herbs I employ...”

“That’s enough. We will simply examine the taste and aroma of these four,” Timalo shot back, sounding like he was having to stop himself from clicking his tongue. Then he began personally cutting up the herbs.

The ira was shaped like a red maple leaf, the shishi looked like a yellow señorita banana, the nafua was long and narrow like bamboo grass, and the yural was like a pea green spring onion. Aside from the yural, they had each been dried out. We had been handed samples of all four at once, so it was difficult to tell which smell was coming from where at the moment.

“Ah, Rimee Ruu, you don’t have to force yourself to try these,” I whispered.

The young girl’s eyebrows drooped as she said, “I don’t? But I came along as a chef, so is it really okay for me to be the only one not doing my job?”

“There’s no need to push yourself to take part. Besides, the tongues of young children are highly sensitive, so you taste bitterness and spiciness more intensely than the rest of us.”

“Is that really true? But Lala’s worse with bitter stuff than I am.”

“Yeah, so maybe Lala Ruu’s tongue is still like a child’s.”

Rimee Ruu shot me a bright smile, apparently having decided that just smelling the herbs was enough.

“Oh, and you don’t need to push yourself either, Toor Deen. You’re only two years older than Rimee Ruu, after all.”

“No. I want to do all I can for my own sake too.”

Having said that, Toor Deen brought a bit of red ira leaf to her mouth, and instantly her eyes grew teary. It didn’t have all that strong of a smell, but when I bit into it, it was incredibly spicy. It seemed to be even more potent than chitt seeds, with a spiciness resembling that of a chili pepper.

Is this stuff actually good for your heart? It feels more like it would raise your blood pressure.

Next up was the banana-like shishi, which was pretty surprising as well. It had a refreshing scent, but its flavor stung sharply all the way up through my nose, and I could easily see it bringing someone to tears if you got your amounts wrong.

The nafua had an oddly grassy smell despite being dried out, and when I bit into it, I was greeted by an overwhelming bitterness. It was so strong that it seemed like it would be utterly unusable on its own.

Then you had the spring onion-like yural. When I touched it, I could feel how dense it was inside. It was so tough that it might have been more accurate to call it a branch rather than a stalk. It had a light, faint smell to it, and a minty taste. It was probably also going to prove difficult to cook with.

“These herbs all seem difficult to use... If you cook the yural, the aroma gets weaker, correct?” Timalo asked with a sour look.

“Yes,” Varkas replied with a small nod. “A bit of sweetness remains, but the flavor vanishes. It can be combined with something else that is sweet like sugar, honey, or fruit to give a dish a bit of color, or you can add it raw after cooking. Apparently, children will chew on it in place of sweets in Sym.”

“Hmm. So making confections with it is one possible route to take, then,” Timalo remarked, agreeing with Varkas for the first time. If it really was a mint-like herb, then that probably was the ideal way to use it.

“Still, as for the other herbs... Hmm, this ira leaf doesn’t seem all that different from chitt seeds, but its price is much higher, correct?”

“Yes. One leaf costs as much as fifty chitt seeds...so you would be better off using the latter if you cannot sense any significant difference between the two.”

With a sulky look, Timalo placed the plate back down on the workstation. “As Sir Varkas has stated, all of these herbs need to be paired with others in order to produce a good result. Please take some of each of them back with you and experiment in your own kitchens.”

“Indeed...” Varkas quietly added. There was still no emotion showing on his face, but he still looked incredibly disappointed to me.

3

Ingredients from other towns in Selva were also shown off, but none of them were new to me.

They included the familiar chan and ro’hyoi, green tarapa, especially large chatchi, and a variety of nenon that was white and very sweet. A far-off place like the capital, Algrad, would probably have an abundance of remarkable ingredients, but this time around, only merchant groups from nearby towns had made deliveries. The chefs that were gathered also knew about chan and ro’hyoi, so there was no need to offer an explanation before making deals to purchase them.

With that, Timalo and the other chefs picked up their shares of the

ingredients and left the kitchen, leaving only us chefs from the forest's edge, Varkas's group, and Polarth. At this point, it was half past the lower fourth hour. The leading clan heads' meeting had started at the lower third hour, so it was possible they would be heading home soon. However, we still had the crucial back half of our job here to take care of.

"My apologies for the late introduction. You are Sir Mikel's daughter, are you not?" Varkas said, offering her a bow as they stood with a workstation separating them. "I am Varkas of The Silver Star. Though Sir Mikel and I were not acquaintances, I tasted his cooking many times at The Maiden in White. Our methods differed greatly, but I always felt that he was one of the foremost chefs in all of Genos."

"Thank you. I'm sure if my father heard that, it would make him very happy," Myme replied, her cheeks flushed as she bowed back. "I've heard of you from my father too. Would it be possible to sample your cooking today?"

"Yes. It would not do to have only your group trouble yourselves."

"I'm very glad to hear it, and honored too. I can't imagine you'll be very satisfied with my cooking, but I prepared the best dish I can manage at the moment, so I would very much appreciate hearing your impressions."

The members of our group had already completed our dishes, and they were just being kept warm now. So, what sort of dish would Varkas, Myme, Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, and I be trying first?

"We're the most inexperienced out of everyone here, so could you sample our dish first?" Reina Ruu called out.

Rimee Ruu and Yun Sudra helped set the table, putting plates in front of Varkas's group. The dish in question was their teriyaki stew. Polarth was excitedly wringing his hands as he looked at it.

"Yes, this looks truly delicious. My stomach has been making quite a commotion since we sampled the black fuwano dipping soba. Though it is a time in between meals, I've been terribly hungry for quite a while now."

"I hope it's to your liking..." Reina Ruu replied, but she and Sheera Ruu were staring straight at Varkas and no one else.

“Well then, let’s give it a try.”

Showing no enthusiasm at all, Varkas picked up his metal spoon, and everyone else did the same.

For a while there was nothing to be heard but the sound of slurping soup, and I felt even more nervous than I did at the thought of my own dish being tasted. Unlike their stew from last time, this was one of Reina and Sheera Ruu’s two most well-developed original dishes. If Varkas said this one was no good as well, there was a good chance the two of them would be left feeling pretty depressed about it.

Finally, Varkas broke the stifling silence by saying, “Delicious... The tau oil and sugar have come together in perfect harmony. And this flavor... Did you use mamaria wine from Genos?”

“Yes. Asuta taught us that the sweetness from the fruit wine is more important than the sweetness from the sugar in this dish,” Sheera Ruu replied, as Reina Ruu had fallen silent.

“You added tau oil and fruit wine to the tarapa base, correct? Then you added sugar, salt, dried pico leaves...and is that panam honey as well?”

“Yes, we used a little of it when grilling the giba meat.”

“I see. Giba meat comes from undomesticated animals, so it has an incredibly powerful, wild flavor. And yet, this blend manages to bring everything into a proper balance,” Varkas commented with a nod, then he silently looked over Sheera and Reina Ruu. “My apologies, but are you truly the same women who attended the previous taste testing?”

“Huh? What do you...?”

“I am truly sorry. I am very bad at remembering faces. And though I know it is quite rude to say so, the fact that you all wear the same attire makes it even harder for me to tell you apart.”

Sheera Ruu broke out in a somewhat troubled smile and replied, “Yes, we are absolutely the same chefs from the forest’s edge who attended that event. I’m very sorry that we served such a poor dish last time.”

“I see. I find it hard to believe both dishes were made by the same people. If you had told me Sir Asuta prepared this, I might well have believed you,” Varkas stated, and then he turned his gaze toward Roy. “It seems you were right to say the chefs of the forest’s edge were not to be underestimated, uh...”

“It’s Roy. Don’t you think it’s about time you at least remembered my name?” Roy replied with a sour look.

“My apologies,” Varkas said back with a bow. “It is just as you said, Sir Roy. It is quite a surprise that there are other chefs besides Sir Asuta there who can prepare such a dish.”

“Varkas, you don’t need to call a mere assistant ‘sir,’” Shilly Rou instantly remarked, only for Varkas to tilt his head.

“But it is not as if I have hired Sir Roy, so I cannot treat him so impolitely. I have no intention of referring to someone such as him without a title.”

“Huh? You didn’t take Roy on as an apprentice, Varkas?” I interjected without thinking.

“No,” Varkas replied, shaking his head. “These three are more than enough for me, so I do not have the leeway to take on any more. That is why I decided to decline his request to become my apprentice.”

“But he wouldn’t back down, so he’s been helping with our work rather than Varkas’s, on the condition that he doesn’t get in Varkas’s way,” Bozl added with a largehearted grin. “He isn’t even being paid, so you can’t really call him an assistant either. He simply wishes to stand alongside us and assist with our work so he can study even a little of Varkas’s techniques.”

“I see. So that’s how it is.”

I glanced at Roy, but he turned away in a huff. There was plenty I wanted to say to him, but most of it would have been too embarrassing for him at a place and time like this. And so, I just secretly admired his determination.

“Still, this dish truly is delicious. You show excellent skill at handling meat, just as Sir Asuta does. It’s a lively flavor, no doubt precisely because it is giba rather than kimyuus or karon. That is undoubtedly why Varkas feels this dish is just so *right*,” Bozl remarked, then with a joking shrug of his thick shoulders added,

“Well, I already realized how skilled you two are when I went to the post town. I told Varkas as much too, but it doesn’t seem my words reached his ears at all.”

“It did indeed reach my ears. However, as I have said, I cannot truly know such a thing until I have tasted a dish with my own tongue.” Varkas’s elusive gaze then slowly turned our way. “At any rate, this dish seems to have been created along the same lines as yours, Sir Asuta. Are these women your apprentices?”

“I wouldn’t say that, but I’ve taught them a variety of things.”

“I see. Then that places them in the same position as my apprentices... I very much look forward to seeing what sort of dishes Bozl and the others will invent someday, having studied my techniques.” With that, Varkas’s gaze fixated on Reina and Sheera Ruu. “You two will surely also begin to walk a different path than Sir Asuta eventually. When that time comes, I will be eagerly awaiting all the new dishes you are going to create as well.”

“Thank you very much. Your cooking shook us quite a bit, so it is quite an honor to hear you say that,” Sheera Ruu said with a deep bow, and then she turned toward Reina Ruu with a smile. At the same moment, all the strength seemed to drain from Reina Ruu’s body, and she had to start leaning against Sheera Ruu. “Wh-What’s the matter, Reina Ruu? Are you not feeling well?”



“I’m sorry... I just suddenly felt all weak...” As Sheera Ruu helped to support her, Reina Ruu also bowed to Varkas with some barely noticeable tears welling up in her eyes. “Thank you, Varkas. I am truly grateful to hear those words, from the depths of my heart.”

“My words carry no such weight. What you should value instead are Sir Asuta’s words alone.”

Varkas was quite blunt, but that didn’t matter at all. After all, Reina and Sheera Ruu looked utterly overjoyed, huddled up against one another. To them, Varkas was someone special, so I felt just as happy for them as I would if it had been me receiving his acknowledgment.

“Well then, could we try my dish next?” Myme asked, and fresh plates were quickly handed out. It was a dish made with giba meat and vegetables boiled in a karon-milk-based broth and then sandwiched between two pieces of baked poitan.

“Hmm. This is the dish you sold in the post town, isn’t it?” Bozl asked.

“Yes!” Myme answered with an energetic nod. “I was busy running my stall during the revival festival, so I wasn’t able to focus on my studies. As such, I haven’t had time to come up with a recipe better than this one yet. My apologies for presenting such a crude dish.”

“Oh-ho, this dish smells truly delicious as well,” Polarth said, being the first to have picked up his plate. “Yes, this is fantastic!” he remarked, eyes sparkling. “It’s absolutely delectable, and not crude in the least... Ah, and Yang has been praising you quite a lot as well. I’ve been so busy that I keep completely forgetting to mention it when I visit the post town. Yes, your skills truly rival those of Sir Asuta.”

“Thank you very much,” Myme replied with a sigh of relief. It seemed her greatest concern really had been earning the displeasure of a noble like Polarth.

Meanwhile, Varkas and his apprentices, Shilly Rou aside, were all reacting in the same way as they had when eating Reina and Sheera Ruu’s dish. Which is to say, Varkas and Tatumai remained expressionless, Bozl smiled, and Roy wore a sour look.

As for Shilly Rou, the look on her face was incredibly serious. The portions of Myme's dish that we had been given only amounted to about three bites' worth, but she was taking her time meticulously chewing every last morsel. There was an almost bloodcurdling level of intensity about her.

"This is Sir Mikel's cooking," Varkas eventually said in a tone I couldn't read any emotion from. "Ah, no, I do not mean that Sir Mikel created this same dish in the past. But it was made using his techniques."

"Yes, my father is the one who instructed me... Of course, I believe I've also been influenced by Asuta lately too."

"Sir Asuta's skills are rather similar to Sir Mikel's, to be sure. However, you truly are Sir Mikel's child," Varkas stated, his gaze fixed directly onto Myme. "You are Lady Myme, correct? Just how old are you, exactly?"

"As of this silver month, I'm eleven years old."

"Eleven... Then you are seven years younger than Sir Asuta and Shilly Rou."

Now that he mentioned it, Shilly Rou had been the same age as me, but now that the new year had arrived, she had turned eighteen. However, I had decided that the twenty-fourth of the yellow month, the day when I had appeared at the forest's edge, would be my new birthday, so I still considered myself to be seventeen.

At any rate, Varkas seemed to be in really high spirits, even if he was silent and unmoving at the moment.

"I sense that you have already grasped the flavor that you are seeking. While it may be rude of me to say so, this single dish may even be closer to perfection than the ones that Sir Asuta has presented."

"N-No, that's not true at all..."

"However, a chef who can only produce one dish cannot be called full-fledged. You are still so young, but the thought of all the dishes you will make from here on out... Just imagining it is enough to make me tremble with excitement." At that, Varkas gave a small shake of his head and sighed.

"However, I do have one concern. As Sir Asuta has said, young children possess quite a sharp sense of taste."

“Huh?” I said without thinking. Was he referring to what I had said to Rimee Ruu and Toor Deen back when we were examining ingredients? But I had been lowering my voice to make sure no one else would overhear at the time...

“The level of sensitivity that your tongue retains in the long term could determine your future path. If you keep that fantastic sense of taste and continue to grow...I have no doubt that you will become a chef whose skill exceeds that of myself and Sir Mikel.”

“I could never exceed my father,” Myme replied with the exact same earnest smile as always. “But I’m honored just to hear you say that, Varkas. I want to continue following my father’s teachings and move forward step by step.”

“Yes, and I wish to live long enough to see the chef you will eventually grow to become,” Varkas said, and then he glanced at Shilly Rou. “Shilly Rou, a chef even younger than you has now proven her exquisite skills to us. I hope that you will keep on striving your hardest as well.”

“Of course...” Shilly Rou replied in a low voice. She didn’t seem to be as thrown out of sorts as when Varkas had praised me, but her eyes were blazing even more intensely than they had been back then.

“Well then, my dish is next up. Toor Deen, could you lend me a hand?” I said.

“Y-Yes, understood.”

My dish still needed some finishing touches, so we hurriedly finished them up, and Yun Sudra and the others carried it out for us.

“Ah, I have been looking forward to this dish,” Varkas stated, but then he tilted his head a little. “However, it seems to have a somewhat different aroma about it. Did you use dried seaweed and fish?”

“I’m impressed. You can figure out that much just from the smell, huh?”

The dish I had made was curry soba.

Varkas had been thoroughly taken with the giba curry that Bozl had brought back from the post town, and I had already been tasked with making black fuwano dipping soba today. With that in mind, I had figured this would be both the most fitting and least burdensome dish to prepare.

I had prepared it alongside the curry I made to sell, then combined it with the soup base I had thrown together here. The only thing I had added after that was some chatchi starch to maintain the creaminess.

Personally, I preferred curry udon, but it wasn't as if it was bad with soba. During our one day off on the first of the silver month, I had carefully experimented with the ratio of the broth to the noodles, and I felt it had come out pretty good in the end.

"You said to make a curry using the best ingredients available in the pantry here, Varkas, but I was already able to get ahold of all the fresh ingredients I needed in the post town, so I don't think much has changed about it. But it wouldn't feel right to offer you the same dish you already ate, so I prepared this to go along with black fuwano soba."

"So that thin and narrow black fuwano is inside of there?"

"Yes. It may be a little tricky to eat, but you seemed interested in hot soba too, so it felt just right."

"Thank you. I feel as if my heart is beating faster before I've even tasted it," Varkas stated, remaining expressionless all the same.

This dish was also being unveiled to Myme and the chefs of the forest's edge for the first time, so I had prepared enough for everyone.

Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, and Toor Deen were using chopsticks for practice, but everyone else was using a fork-like utensil. Since Tatumai was the only one of them accustomed to eating noodle dishes, the rest all spun the soba around like it was pasta, then supported it with a spoon so it wouldn't spill as they brought it to their mouths.

Unsurprisingly, the first one to speak up was once again Polarth. "Yes, this is delicious as well! In fact, I like it even better than the cold broth style you taught to the chefs earlier!"

"Is that so? Well, thank you very much. Still, preparing curry takes more time and is more expensive than the broth from before."

"In the castle town, the cost would be no issue. It's true that it is more difficult to eat this way, but I believe the people of Genos tend to enjoy hot

dishes better.”

In that case, should I have gone with soba served in a hot broth instead of dipping soba? Well, eating the noodles would have been harder if they were coated in thick curry rather than thin broth, and if someone had had too much difficulty with it, the noodles could have gotten soggy in the meantime. That was why I had gone with the cold dipping soba instead of using a hot broth.

Polarth was still talking. “And besides, this curry dish was already fantastic to begin with! If even citizens of the post town who are utterly unfamiliar with Sym cooking can accept it, then it would surely be even more popular in the castle town. If you could teach the chefs of the castle town how to make it, then we could purchase even more herbs from Sym and...”

“That would not do,” Varkas calmly interjected.

In the short time that I had been looking away, he had completely cleared his teacup-sized portion. There wasn’t even any broth left.

“This was already discussed at the previous taste testing, but the recipes for delicious dishes are like treasure to chefs. One should refrain from giving them away carelessly.”

“But Sir Asuta just gave away his black fuwano noodle recipe a short while ago, and you said you would tell everyone exactly how you use herbs if it was necessary, did you not?”

“Methods to handle herbs and the complete recipe of a dish are different things entirely. As for the black fuwano noodles, once it becomes known that there is a recipe where fuwano is cut long and thin, others would be more or less capable of imitating it right away. Sir Asuta simply saved some time and effort in that process,” Varkas stated, still expressionless but now talking a little faster. “However, could anyone truly imitate this dish? This is Sir Asuta’s accomplishment and no one else’s. As such, only those whom he acknowledges should be taught how to prepare it. I certainly have no intention of teaching anyone but my apprentices how to make my dishes. That is how it should be for chefs.”

“Hmm, is that so? What are your thoughts on the matter, Sir Asuta?”

“Well, this dish was a perfectly common one back in my home country, so it doesn’t feel like anything I should need to hide...” But then I stopped and gave it some thought. Though I had a somewhat different perspective than Varkas, there was still something bothering me. “However, it took a great deal of time and effort to recreate the dish here, and the women of the forest’s edge helped me out a lot along the way. Naturally, that includes the women who are with us now. We grated a huge amount of herbs, checked the taste over and over, tried out all sorts of combinations, and finally managed to recreate this flavor. It’s possible I never would have completed the dish if I had tried to tackle it all on my own.”

At both the Ruu settlement and the Fa house, a great many women had been helping me with my work. I had gotten a ton of assistance on all of the dishes I had created lately, but the curry was definitely the one that had taken the greatest effort.

“It wouldn’t feel fair to all of them if I just carelessly gave away the recipe we worked so hard to perfect. I obviously very much welcome the use of our curry base to create unique dishes, like a couple people have been doing in the post town. But I want to take some more time and think carefully about what we should allow to be done with the spice blend we created together.”

“I see. If that is how you feel, Sir Asuta, then I of course shall not attempt to force you. Besides, the herbs that are used to make your curry are running a bit low at the moment,” Polarth said with a smile as he carefully wiped the yellow stains from around his mouth. “And it makes me truly glad to hear you express your honest feelings. After all, I want to continue working alongside the people of the forest’s edge, so please speak freely if I unwittingly make any more unreasonable requests.”

“Right. Thank you.”

“Still, it seems you are quite taken, Sir Varkas. You did not even participate in the taste testing for the black fuwano dipping soba, and yet your eyes seem to have caught fire after trying this dish.”

“This dish is special. Even in the castle town, not many chefs show such skill in handling herbs from Sym. And today, Sir Asuta included dried seaweed and fish

in the recipe, enriching it even further.” Varkas’s deep green eyes slowly turned my way. “This dish has been perfected. The only room for additional consideration that I can see is in the selection of vegetables...”

“Ah, this is a dish I sell in the post town, so I try to keep the cost low. But when I make it at home, I use different vegetables and mushrooms.”

“But I told you I wished to try this dish in its perfected form...” Varkas stated, his graceful eyebrows drooping ever so slightly.

“Sorry about that. However—and I would say this about any other dish too—I don’t believe dishes have just one singular absolute form.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, take this dish for example. There’s no need to fixate on only using giba meat with it. You could make something similarly tasty with kimyuus or karon, and the vegetables that you use can be changed out based on personal tastes. The inn owners in the post town use their own preferred vegetables, and some people may just happen to find those versions tastier.” It seemed like the meaning of my words still hadn’t made it through to him, so I continued. “Back in my home country, there are restaurants that specialize in curry, where you can enjoy tons of different varieties. For example, it could be served with fried meat, have a cooked egg on top, or use lots of vegetables and mushrooms... And they would also adjust the level of spiciness and decide which type of broth to use for each recipe.”

“Even if you just change the broth you use, would it not be an entirely different dish at that point?”

“No. Thanks to the powerful flavor and aroma of the spices, they were all still considered curry. And everyone has their own favorite variety, so there’s no single absolute way to make it.”

After falling silent for a while, Varkas said, “I see... You most certainly are an extraordinary chef, Sir Asuta. That much is obvious, considering the fact that you come from overseas, but I feel like I finally understand what that means in the truest sense.”

“Oh? How so?”

“Lady Myme and those women from the forest’s edge are most certainly not all that far behind you in terms of skill. This curry feels special to me, but looking at the other dishes you have presented, their creations would seem to equal yours. And yet, you are still truly exceptional. Having been born in a completely foreign land, your way of thinking and the techniques you use are totally unique. That is why I have become so fixated on you, Sir Asuta,” Varkas stated, gently closing his eyes. “I cannot imitate your methods. However, I feel a desire to have more of your cooking, and I wish to know you better. I do not feel that way about any other chef. To me, you are a person no other can compare to, Sir Asuta.”

I bowed my head to him. “Thank you...”

Still, while Varkas looked to be in high spirits, I was feeling a bit lonesome. It wasn’t my own efforts that had made me unique. I had just been brought here from far away by some unseen hand of fate. It could very well be true that I was someone special here in this world, but that didn’t feel like something to be proud of.

Even so, it’s allowed me to be of use to everyone from the forest’s edge.

And by the same token, I had also been able to form a rather unusual bond with a chef like Varkas. So, instead of pointlessly withdrawing into myself, I made up my mind to just feel happy about the way things had played out.

And then, to wrap things up, it was finally time for us to sample Varkas’s cooking...

4

“This is a soup dish made with gigi leaves,” Varkas said.

We had some clay dishes lined up in front of us, which were currently being filled with a rich soup that had a jet black color very similar to the whole roast kimyuus we had seen at the previous event.

“Ooh. This dish looks like something really special,” Polarth said.

“The large amount of gigi leaves it contains is where it gets its color from. Please give it a try and see how it tastes before it cools off.”

Going along with his suggestion, I went ahead and picked up my spoon. It was easy to tell how viscous it was at a glance, and I couldn't see what was in it whatsoever. The one only thing I could make out was the complex aroma of countless herbs intertwining.

I touched my spoon to the surface of the soup and was met with even more resistance than I had expected. It had a real weighty feel to it, almost like melted cheese. It might have been even thicker and heavier than the karon milk broth Myme had prepared.

Just what is this dish?

My anticipation heightened even more as I brought a bit of just the pitch-black liquid itself to my mouth.

Instantly, all sorts of flavors exploded in my mouth. It was an incredibly complicated taste. Just like with that whole-roast kimyuus, the main flavor was this deep bitterness, which was balanced out by whatever else was in there. Sweetness, spiciness, sourness, and bitterness... None of them stood out especially strongly, and they all seemed to combine together in perfect harmony.

The sweetness I sensed seemed to have the mellowness of fruit. Yes, it was definitely fruity, though the soup also had the sticky sweetness of honey.

The spiciness, meanwhile, felt more herbal. Rather than coming from something like chili peppers, it seemed to be a more nonspecific peppery spiciness. It was possible he had used pico leaves for that. The spiciness was also highly refreshing, which might have been a benefit of using that keru root from before.

As for the sourness, I could sense fruit and herbs in addition to mamaria vinegar. In all likelihood, that fruit was also contributing to the sweetness, and the same was true of the herbs and the spiciness. I couldn't even hazard a guess as to how many types of fruit and herbs he had used.

He seemed to have also used more gigi leaves than he had for the whole-roast kimyuus, as the soup was distinctly bitter. It seemed to be the same sort of bitterness you got from cacao. Yes, after more than seven months, I had finally come across a flavor that reminded me of chocolate and cocoa.

Obviously, Varkas hadn't just thrown that flavor out on its own, as he had also gotten a great stock from some meat and vegetables. It was rather oily, so he must have added milk fat too. And I got the feeling I was tasting some seafood in it to boot.

That was the result of taking just a single bite.

As I tried to restrain the excitement I was feeling, I dug around a bit to see what sort of ingredients had been added to the soup. The first one I captured looked like a chunk of chatchi. However, it was entangled in a web of meaty fibers. I went ahead and popped it into my mouth alongside a spoonful of soup.

The chatchi had been thoroughly boiled. The soup's complex flavors had seeped into it, and it was so tender that there was no need to even bite into it. The stuff that was entangled around it, meanwhile, seemed to be karon meat fibers. It was a lot like beef sinew, so it was incredibly tender too.

It seemed that the solid bits were just as tasty as the soup itself. Despite how terribly complicated the soup's flavor was, I honestly thought it was really good. Apparently, my tongue had grown fairly well accustomed to Varkas's cooking by this point.

Aside from the chatchi, it also contained nenon and nanaar, but I wasn't able to pick out anything else. However, I had to wonder if Varkas had employed a regular stock made from a large amount of vegetables for this soup, or if he had boiled the vegetables until they had basically dissolved. There wasn't any proper meat in it, but the beef sinew-like karon fibers seemed to have spread evenly throughout.

It felt fantastic when I swallowed it too. It really was like melted cheese, with the way it went down gradually. As a result, the satisfying sensation of eating it remained for the entire extended length of time it took to experience even a single bite. The fact that this didn't seem like a fault was part of what made the dish so unique.

How in the world had he made it so thick? Had he simply added a bunch of fuwano flour like Timalo had? Or had he made use of the stickiness of gigo?

"So this is what Varkas's cooking is like..." Myme remarked in admiration, ultimately being the first person to speak up. "It's incredibly delicious. Just how

many different ingredients did you use?”

“How many of them can you identify?” Varkas countered.

“Huh?” Myme asked, her eyes widening. “My father has told me I can’t use a bunch of different ingredients, so I’ve only worked with half of what they sell just in the post town. All I can make out are the aria, chatchi, nenon, nanaar, gigo...and I think you also used sheema and ma gigo—Asuta’s had me taste test them before.”

I had gotten the feeling that there might have been aria dissolved in the soup, but I hadn’t sensed the presence of the daikon-like sheema or taro-like ma gigo at all.

“The meat is karon, though I don’t know the cut. I’ve only handled leg meat, after all. And for the seasonings, you have salt, sugar, tau oil, pico leaves, milk fat, and red mamaria vinegar. Then there are the herbs. I think you included several that Asuta uses in his curry, but I don’t work with them myself, so I’m not so sure... Ah, and there seemed to be crushed ramanpa nuts and some of those hoboi seeds and that keru root we just tried.”

“Correct on all fronts. What about the fruit?”

“Uh, you probably used sheel, arow, and ramam. And there were some other sweet or sour things in there that I didn’t recognize too.”

“That’s plenty. I believe there are only one or two people in the castle town capable of providing such an accurate analysis,” Varkas remarked with a satisfied nod. “You certainly seem to possess an exceptional sense of taste. I suspect that that is precisely what allows you to prepare such an excellent dish with so few ingredients.”

“Oh no, there’s still so much that I need to learn. Also, I think I can understand now why my father has so much praise for you,” Myme said, narrowing her eyes a bit. “Just like he told me, you’re an even better chef than he is. It’s actually really frustrating, how obvious that is now.”

“Only because Sir Mikel was forced to stop working. Had he continued to polish his skills as a chef, the meals he would be able to prepare now would surely be even more delicious than they were back then,” Varkas said,

narrowing his own eyes as if his thoughts had wandered off to the distant past. “Though Sir Mikel is older than I am, he seemed to possess an incredible sense of taste. As humans pass their prime, they generally lose that fine sense of taste, so the fact that he retained his was truly surprising to me. If that is something you inherited from him, you might also keep that same sharpness as you grow older.”

“I don’t know about that, but at any rate, I want to offer my thanks to the western god again and again for allowing me the chance to sample your cooking today. And to Asuta, for inviting me along.”

“Yes, Sir Asuta himself is an exceptionally important person to me in his own right, but I am also truly grateful for how he put someone such as you in contact with me.”

I was left bewildered, suddenly finding myself sandwiched between compliments.

“No, Varkas, you and Mikel were deeply connected to begin with, so it’s the guidance of the gods that brought you two together. I may have guided her here, but, well, fate can be a strange thing.”

Now that I thought about it, Mikel’s path as a chef had been cut short by Cyclaeus, whereas when Varkas had caught that wicked noble’s attention, he had been able to gain even more experience because of it. I had made my last comment without really thinking about it much, but I had to wonder now whether this actually had happened due to some strange twist of fate, or if it truly had been the guidance of the western god that had led to Varkas encountering Mikel’s daughter Myme.

“There’s something I’d like to ask you, Varkas...” Sheera Ruu said in a reserved tone. “What sort of herbs are the gigi leaves you used in this dish? When Asuta was first creating his curry, we tried out the tastes of all the herbs from Sym that we could get, but I don’t recall any of them having this kind of color or taste.”

“Ah, yes. Gigi leaves are supposedly of no real use at all if just utilized as is,” Varkas remarked, then he glanced at Tatumai. “Tatumai, fetch a gigi leaf.”

“You don’t mind?”

“I do not. All of the chefs here are qualified to use whichever ingredients they please.”

Timalo would definitely have been displeased about having Varkas cast doubt on his qualifications if he were still here.

Anyway, Tatumai returned from the pantry with a single small leaf. It was dark brown and round, about five centimeters or so in diameter. Though it was small, it was also thick, and despite having surely been dried out, it didn't look like it had shriveled up much.

I recognized that leaf. From what I could recall, it had been quite bitter, and I had decided it wouldn't be useful as a spice for the curry.

“So this is a gigi leaf? Its color and scent seem to be completely different from when it's cooked.”

“Yes. This is what is known as a tea leaf. In Selva we prefer zozo and chatchi tea, but in Sym they boil gigi for tea.”

“Oh yeah, I've heard that you can use chatchi skin to make tea. We had some when we visited Daleim a little while ago... So, is there a special technique for boiling gigi leaves?”

“Indeed there is. You put gigi leaves in a pot and place a lid on top, then use low heat so that they will not burn. When you do so, they turn black in color and take on their characteristic bitterness and aroma. Easterners then add hot water to them in order to make tea.”

“I see. So you don't add any water during the heating process?”

“That is correct, as the process is actually meant to remove moisture. Simply drying them in the sun is not sufficient for that.”

In that case, it sounded like he was talking about a roasting process. It was quite interesting to think that that cacao-like flavor from before had come from leaves rather than beans.

“Will your people be able to make use of these gigi leaves, Sir Asuta? Such bitterness is quite difficult to handle.”

“Well, I would imagine Toor Deen might be able to make good use of them,” I

said, just going with whatever had immediately come to mind, causing my precious young colleague to grow terribly flustered.

“Wh-Who, me? I could never handle such a difficult herb...”

“Oh, sorry. I was just thinking it could be useful for making sweets. I might have said more than I should have.”

It most definitely hadn't been on purpose. However, Toor Deen still went and hid behind my back as if to escape from everyone's gazes.

“Using gigi leaves in sweets, you say? But given how bitter they are, that seems like the type of dish they would be least suited for,” Varkas remarked.

I nodded at him. “Yeah. But back in my home country, it was something we did pretty frequently. Bitter flavors can enhance sweet flavors, just like sour ones do.”

“How terribly interesting. I certainly never would have imagined using gigi leaves in sweets even in my wildest dreams.”

“Oh really? For now, I'd like to bring some gigi leaves back with us so we can try a couple things with them. Of course, I would need your permission for that, Polarth.”

“You may of course bring back as many as you like. As previously agreed, we shall cover the expense of whatever you take to experiment with,” Polarth replied with a joyful smile, and then he looked at Toor Deen behind me. “If you use them to make some kind of delicious treat, then I hope that you will treat Lady Odifia to them. That young lady seems as if she will throw a temper tantrum if she is not allowed to invite you to a tea party at least once a month.”

“Yes, I understand...” Toor Deen answered in a voice so quiet that I wondered if it would even reach him as she clung tightly to my clothes behind my back.

“Well then, I do believe that concludes this taste testing. It certainly proved to be an enjoyable experience. All that is left is for our visitors to see the live gyama, and then we shall disperse. And as for your payment, it will be prepared for you in a separate room!”

We were told we could just leave the tableware, so we all promptly left the

kitchen in a crowd through the far door. Other chefs would be preparing dinner in there for the noble visitors later. They had probably already started working in the small kitchen, but the time had to be after the lower fifth hour by now, so they had surely been impatiently waiting for this kitchen to be made available as well.

As we were leaving, a voice called out, “Hey.” However, it was actually Roy speaking to Reina Ruu rather than me. “You’ve been weirdly quiet this whole time today. Are you letting yourself get distracted because Varkas praised your skills?”

Reina Ruu instantly frowned and stared up at Roy’s face, which was displaying his usual sour look.

“What are you talking about? I can’t imagine why you would think you have the right to find fault with me.”

“At least let me say that much. I haven’t gotten Varkas to even try my cooking,” Roy grumbled as we walked. Ludo Ruu then casually moved to take up a position next to his sister, but Roy paid him no heed and continued. “Well, not that there’s anything special about my cooking in the least, so of course Varkas wouldn’t have any interest in it. But don’t forget that you only drew Varkas’s attention because of your relationship with Asuta.”

“You’re quite talkative today. You only seem to get that way when showing contempt for others.”

“I’m not showing contempt, I’m giving you advice. Varkas might actually remember your name if you keep making such excellent dishes.” Then Roy’s gaze turned somewhat forceful as he stared at Reina Ruu. “I worked under Mikel in the past, so I’m quite familiar with the cooking techniques he used. Whether or not I can actually use them myself is a whole other matter, though... But regardless, even if I was still working under him now, I could never surpass his daughter.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“You asked me about this a while ago, didn’t you? Why I chose to work under Varkas instead of Mikel,” Roy said, his gaze still fixed on Reina Ruu’s face. “At least for now, what I need is Varkas’s strength, not Mikel’s. Otherwise, all the

ingredients piled up in this manor will go to waste. If I tried to become Mikel's apprentice under these circumstances, I wouldn't be able to accomplish anything at all."

Reina Ruu furrowed her brow, looking troubled. But after glaring at her for a bit longer, Roy suddenly looked away.

"You shattered the last bit of self-respect I had to smithereens. So I'm going to become a better chef than you, no matter what."

She offered no response to that statement.

"That dish from before was unbelievably delicious too, damn it..." Roy muttered, picking up his pace to catch up to Bozl and the others.

With her frown still firmly in place, Reina Ruu turned my way. "Wh-What am I supposed to say to that, Asuta?"

"Huh? I don't think there's any real need for you to say or do anything. Roy's got a sharp tongue on him, but I don't think he seriously sees you as his enemy or anything."

"That's not exactly what I was worried about. But based on what he said, doesn't it seem like I was the one who threw his life out of order, rather than you or Myme?" Reina Ruu looked unusually flustered. She had a face that made her look younger than she actually was to begin with, so she looked downright childish at the moment.

"I wouldn't put it that way. I would say that you got him fired up instead. He said something similar at the last taste testing, right?"

"But..."

"A long time ago, you got all frustrated because you thought Sheera Ruu had pulled ahead of you, right? I'm sure Roy felt similarly, which is what made him ask Varkas to accept him as an apprentice."

That was all guesswork, but I was pretty sure it was right on the mark. Roy was short-tempered and awkward, and hated to lose above all else. Furthermore, his passion for cooking was just as strong as ours was.

"To put it simply, Roy's been working hard in his own way, and he was just

trying to express that to you. He hates to lose, so he can't just come out and say these things directly, but I'm sure you've become really important to him."

"I see..." Even so, Reina Ruu's expression still didn't brighten up. However, she didn't seem angry or hurt. She looked more bewildered than anything. "I feel like I'm always thrown for a loop whenever I talk to that man..." she said with a little sigh.

Over her shoulder, I noticed Ludo Ruu grinning and giving me a wink. It wasn't as if I didn't know what he was thinking, but I had no intention of making light of the paths that lay ahead of those two, so I just shrugged.

"Now then, these are live gyama! There's quite a beastly stench inside the pen, is there not?!" Polarth said, and sure enough, there they were in front of us.

They looked like goats, with long beards like you'd see on an old man. Unfortunately, their splendid horns that were like those of a buffalo had all been broken off. Milk-producing female gyama were considered to be quite valuable in Sym, so the ones that had been brought here were all male.

The stuffed head I had seen at The Sledgehammer had black fur, but there were white and brown ones here too. Their bodies were a little over one meter long, and they had surprisingly cute faces. The animals' black eyes with their oblong pupils had clearly caught the attention of Rimee Ruu and the rest of the younger crowd, but what surprised me most of all, personally, was the fact that the gyama all had six legs.

With that, our work in the castle town had finally come to a close.

However, when we returned to the settlement, we learned of some truly shocking developments that had occurred in the meantime. During Melfried's meeting with the leading clan heads of the forest's edge, the castle had made two official requests. One concerned the Gamley Troupe, while the other had come from a merchant group from Sym known as the Black Flight Feathers...

Intermission: A Night at the Fa House

“It’s unbelievable, isn’t it?” I called out.

“Indeed,” Ai Fa said with a nod while voraciously eating the giba meat I had prepared for dinner.

It was currently night on the fifth day of the silver month, after I had finished my work in the castle town and returned home. On the way back, we had stopped by the Ruu settlement, which was where I had heard about the requests Melfried had charged the leading clan heads with.

“I never expected the Gamley Troupe’s request to be accepted so easily. No matter how strong their connections with the nobles are, it seemed like the sort of thing that would have been flatly refused,” I noted.

That was the first matter. The Gamley Troupe’s request to capture a live giba for their show had now been officially approved in the name of Duke Marstein Genos. Apparently, Neeya the minstrel had used his sweet voice to entice a noblewoman from a viscount’s house with ties to the house of Genos, which had allowed their request to successfully make it all the way to the duke himself.

However, that was something that had always been within the realm of possibility. The surprising part was how swiftly it had been approved. Why were they being allowed to go ahead with it so easily? When I asked, the answer I got back was that this had resulted from Marstein’s conservative and proactive sides getting all tangled up in a web together.

“The forest at the foot of Mount Morga is incredibly vast and the hunting grounds we people of the forest’s edge use only occupy a small portion... Therefore, there is no law that prevents people from setting foot in the forest of Morga, aside from the areas where we hunt,” Gazraan Rutim had explained to me in his usual gentle tone, having accompanied the leading clan heads. “However, setting foot on Mount Morga itself is absolutely forbidden. If the varb wolves, giant madarama snakes, and red savages that guard the mountain

are angered, it could lead to the destruction of Genos. Thus, the mountain where those beasts live is the only place that people are truly forbidden to enter. In the end, technically anyone can hunt giba at the mountain's base."

"I can see why. It's no problem for Genos if the number of giba around decreases, so I guess they have no reason to go out of their way to forbid that."

"Right. Of course, entering our hunting grounds without permission is forbidden by the laws of Genos too. That much is also only natural, as someone setting foot there carelessly could easily lose their life to the traps we have set. Although, thinking back, since Ai Fa first encountered you while you were caught in one of her traps, Asuta, I suppose you were breaking the laws of Genos right from the start."

I rustled my own hair with an "Ah ha ha," and Gazraan Rutim smiled, but then our expressions grew serious again.

"Returning to the matter at hand... Mount Morga is surrounded on all sides by forest. We only hunt in the forest to the west, in the area between the mountain and the town of Genos. As it is not safe to spend the night out in the forest, our hunting grounds are limited to a range where we can return home before sunset. But in other words, if you go more than half a day away from our settlement, anyone can enter the forest of Morga. It's just that no townsfolk would have ever wanted to enter the forest where dangerous giba wander about anyway, so there was no point in making a law to forbid it."

But then, the eminently eccentric Gamley Troupe had shown up. And so, even if the nobles or the leading clan heads did try to forbid them from entering the settlement at the forest's edge or the hunting grounds, they would still have been able to hunt a giba in a different part of the forest.

"However, it would be difficult for any townsfolk who enter the forest to recognize the boundary where the mountain begins. If they do come here without anyone knowing and set foot on the mountain by mistake, they could easily end up angering the varb, madarama, and savages." Which meant it would ultimately be far less dangerous to allow them to enter with hunters from the forest's edge supervising them. That was the basic summary.

"Apparently, the nobles are now looking into whether a new law forbidding

entry into the forest of Morga should be written. However, any law they do try to make would matter little. Keeping watch over the entire vast expanse of the forest at all times would be impossible.”

“I see. So the taboo against setting foot on Mount Morga is that strong, huh? Still, I get the feeling that if anyone actually did anger those varb wolves or whatever, they’d be the only ones to pay for it...”

“I cannot say. The taboo existed long before our ancestors moved here to the Morga forest’s edge. Perhaps when the people of Genos first established their town, they tried to clear the forest and mountain and were met with some kind of calamity as a result.”

At any rate, the nobles of Genos had decided that rather than ignore or refuse a slippery group like the Gamley Troupe, it was best to cooperate and keep an eye on them instead.

“For better or worse, the Ruu settlement happens to have just finished their break period, and there are still not that many giba about yet. It’s going to take a little longer for the bounty of the forest to completely recover and for the giba to return in large numbers, so those townsfolk should be able to enter our hunting grounds without being at too much risk.”

The Gamley Troupe wanted to capture a giba alive, so as long as they could safely return with one that got caught in a trap, that should settle the matter.

“Of course, no matter when they come here, there is always a certain degree of danger associated with entering the forest. But no matter what may happen to them, the hunters of the forest’s edge will not be held responsible. Furthermore, if we end up giving them a giba that was caught in one of our traps, they will pay us the equivalent amount of coins that we would have earned from its horns, tusks, pelt, and meat. Additionally, the Gamley Troupe will have to pay us ten white coins per day in exchange for us accompanying them on their endeavor, according to Melfried.”

Melfried himself apparently hadn’t cared much about this whole ridiculous matter one way or the other. Actually, he tended to not care much about anything so long as the laws of Genos were upheld.

“Well, just keeping an eye on some townsfolk won’t be too significant of a

burden for us. And we're only talking about bringing them along while we're going around checking on our traps, not actively hunting giba with them in tow," Gazraan Rutim said. "I'd say it's the other request that's going to be a real headache."

"That Black Flight Feathers merchant group from Sym, huh? Yeah, that's definitely a bigger deal than the whole thing with the Gamley Troupe."

They were a merchant group that had been dealing with Cyclaeus for seven years. They had been the ones who had brought those live gyama to Genos as part of their most recent delivery, along with countless other ingredients, and their leader, Kukuluel, had made a proposal even crazier than the Gamley Troupe's. In short, he had told the nobles that he wanted a highway to Sym to be constructed, passing through the forest of Morga.

Kukuluel's pitch had gone something like this: "In order to travel from Sym to Genos, we must pass through the free territory to the south in order to detour around Mount Morga. However, the people of Jagar are presently constructing a settlement along that path. It is a barren land, and watering holes are scarce, but citizens of Jagar driven from their homes by war have been moving there. They are using a watering hole to cultivate the land and making bricks out of crushed rock, with several hundred people living there already. At this rate, in a few years they may well have constructed a sturdy fort." If that fort was built, it would become difficult for easterners to pass through the area at all. "In such a situation, our only remaining path to Selva would be to the north of Mount Morga. That would surely reduce the number of merchants visiting Genos greatly. After all, if you arrive from that direction, it's far easier to visit other towns." However, there were a great many dangerous bandits in that area, so the merchants very much wished to avoid having to make that switch. "But if a path from the east to the west of Mount Morga could be carved through the forest, we could use that to create a new route. This would amount to the establishment of a third route connecting Sym and Selva. From what I have been told, such a thing has been attempted twice now..."

That had been a reference to the path that Leito's father and Milano Mas's brother-in-law had once tried to establish. However, their plan had been completely ruined by Zattsu Suun and his ilk.

The second attempt would have been when none other than Melfried himself had been collaborating with Kamyua Yoshu, pretending to be a merchant group in order to catch the Suun clan in a trap. The fact that it had all been a deception was hardly a secret, but it wasn't really discussed publicly.

"Putting aside Melfried and Kamyua Yoshu's plot, the initial attempt was indeed a plan to find a safer way to travel to Sym. If they had succeeded, it would have led to easier trade between Sym and Genos than the current route allows. It seems this Kukuluel fellow wishes to see their ambition made into a reality."

Leito's father's plan had remained a matter of discussion for over ten years. The thought that it might finally happen was a heartwarming one for me. However, this was going to be a difficult request for the people of the forest's edge to accommodate.

"So, they're talking about carving out a path through the forest of Morga that anyone can use, without needing to be escorted by the people of the forest's edge every time. But I'm guessing the issue is whether that's actually possible to do," I said.

"Well, it shouldn't be entirely impossible. The path is supposedly going to run through a rocky region, roughly half a day to a full day away from the areas where giba typically appear."

Now that I thought about it, Kamyua Yoshu had mentioned something similar—that they would only need hunters to guide them on the first day, and after that, they could use the rocky region to exit the forest.

"And if they cut down the trees that grow the fruits the giba eat in the vicinity, that should keep the beasts away from their cleared path, just like how the giba don't go near the paths connecting Genos to the settlement. That should make the route safe for anyone to travel."

"But it's not as if there wouldn't be any issues, right?"

Even someone like me who knew very little about this sort of thing could think of one or two serious concerns.

First, if they carved out such a long path, it would reduce the area where giba

could be active. If they began to starve, they would become a greater threat than ever to the fields in the Daleim lands. Nobody would want to see that happen.

The second issue was the question of who would take on such a huge construction job. The people of the forest's edge would never be able to make enough time for that, no matter how much money they were offered, and the townsfolk wouldn't want to work in the forest, which was overflowing with giba.

"The nobles of Genos don't seem to be especially concerned in regard to the fields. The Daleim lands haven't been attacked for months now, so they even increased the reward money they gave us by half of the previous amount." They were also planning to build a fence along the border between the Daleim lands and the forest. That was the best news the people living there could possibly have gotten. "As for who will actually make the path...the nobles intend to use the slaves who work the Turan lands."

"Huh?! You mean the ones from Mahyudra?!"

"Yes. They aren't able to grow fuwano in the rainy season, so the nobles think this would be a perfect way to keep them busy until it's over. The wall around the Turan lands was built during the rainy season too."

So those brawny northerners were going to be forced to clear a path through the forest of Morga? I honestly had no idea how to take that news.

"Isn't it going to be dangerous for them to work in the forest of Morga without any hunters around for protection?"

"Yes. But it's been proposed that we people of the forest's edge could teach everyone involved anything they need to know in order to do their work in the safest way possible. There will also be soldiers from town keeping watch as the northerners work. They seem to be the ones the nobles are most concerned about protecting," Gazraan Rutim said, and then he smiled at me as if to soothe my concerns. "But since the workers are going to be using axes and hatchets to clear the path, the giba will be unlikely to approach. They dislike being around humans and hate loud noises, after all."

"Do you support this idea, Gazraan Rutim?"

“I’d say it’s more that I’m not opposed. If completed, the path would pass fairly close to the Sauti settlement, so Dari Sauti seemed pretty troubled, but this is another way we can lower the boundaries between us and the townsfolk, correct?”

I had no way of knowing. But it was a fact that the forest’s edge was a part of the Genos domain, so in the end the power to make this decision belonged to Marstein alone.

“However, we have no intention of ignoring the will of our people, so our discussions on what we should do about the Gamley Troupe and the road construction will continue until everyone is satisfied. Gulaf Zaza and Dari Sauti are conferring with the clans underneath them now, and they should be coming to visit the Ruu settlement again tomorrow.”

It had been two hours now since that discussion, and as I watched Ai Fa eating heartily out of the corner of my eye, I sighed heavily.

“That was the kind of conversation that can really make you forget anything else that might be going on. Even though the matter of reconciling with the house of Saturas and the increase in reward money are pretty big deals all on their own.”

In regard to our issues with the house of Saturas, it had been decided that a peace banquet would be held. The people of the forest’s edge were being invited as “noble visitors,” but it had been mentioned during the meeting that we could still prepare a dish or two to show them what we were capable of.

“The stuff with the Gamley Troupe is one thing, but using northerners to clear a path through the forest’s edge... It just doesn’t feel real to me.”

“There is no point in us worrying over such things. Let the leading clan heads deal with those hassles,” Ai Fa stated as she thrust her now empty plate at me.

“Ah, right,” I replied as I scooped out some fresh soup that was being kept warm in the pot onto the plate. Today, we were having karon milk soup with lots of different ingredients in it.

“Besides, it is the Ruu who will have to deal with those traveling performers,

and the Sauti who will be forced to handle the matter of clearing that path. If there were townsfolk coming and going freely in front of this house, though, I suppose I could worry myself over it a little.”

“But don’t you feel bad for the Ruu and the Sauti?”

“I do, but these are not the sort of matters where we have any ability to offer assistance,” Ai Fa said as her white teeth tore into some baked poitan. She seemed to be more focused on the food than what I was saying.

Still, it was true that us discussing matters here would do nothing to lighten the load on the leading clan heads, so I switched gears and resumed eating my meal, having stopped partway through.

“It looks like you were really hungry, Ai Fa. I suppose we are having dinner later than usual, though.”

“Indeed. And I just started training to regain my strength three days ago, so I’ve been exceptionally hungry.”

It was true that she hadn’t had many opportunities to exert herself lately, so she had experienced a decline in appetite. Still, considering that she was just starting to get back into things, the way she was eating tonight was quite a performance.

“How’s the taste of the new myamuu giba using keru root? I think it turned out pretty well for how impromptu it was.”

“Yes, it’s tasty.”

“This is the sort of flavor I was aiming for with the myamuu giba to begin with, so I’m gonna talk to Reina and Sheera Ruu about them using it too.”

“I see,” Ai Fa nodded, thrusting her empty plate at me again.

“Huh? Didn’t I just give you seconds? You’ve got a serious appetite.”

“That’s because you made such delicious food.”

Even so, there was only a little bit of that delicious food left. This would be the last serving of the karon milk soup.

I had been so engrossed in our conversation that I was only halfway finished

eating. Ai Fa, on the other hand, was able to finish off her final helping in less than a minute, and then she started staring straight at me.

“Er, do you want me to share my portion with you too?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’ll ruin your health if you don’t eat properly,” Ai Fa said, but her gaze didn’t budge from my face. Her eyes were clearly begging me for more.

“I see. Okay then, in that case, I’ll make some more.”

“That can wait until after you’re done eating.”

“I can’t calm down with you staring at me like that! Go add some extra firewood to the stove.”

I moved the now-empty pot to the floor, then placed another one up against the wall on top of the stove. As it was heating up, I swiftly started slicing some rib meat and tino.

“We’ve got extra Worcestershire sauce and mayonnaise, so I guess I’ll make some okonomiyaki. And I’ll add a fried kimyuu egg too.”

“Very well.”

“Still, it’s not like you were eating that much less during your recovery... I was already worried about you putting on weight due to lack of exercise, so isn’t it a little dangerous to eat this much?”

“Don’t be foolish. It’s only been three days since I started training, and I’ve already shed most of my excess fat.”

Then, as I was mincing up the tino atop a cutting board on the floor, Ai Fa came toward me while still kneeling down. She was shoving her perfectly lean abdomen directly into my line of vision. Her midsection was extremely well defined, and her abs would definitely become visible if she tensed them even a little. Her brown skin was incredibly smooth, and even the shape of her belly button was beautiful.

“I can sense my strength returning, day by day. And I have the food you have been making for me to thank for it, Asuta.”

“It makes me incredibly happy to hear that.”

“If I continue to recover at this rate, I will be able to head out into the forest in less than a month. And fulfilling my agreement with Lem Dom is not far off either.”

“That’s really good to hear... But my dear clan head, when you come that close to me, you make this poor fellow feel awfully embarrassed...”

At that, Ai Fa silently moved back, still kneeling.

Breathing a sigh of relief, I set my knife down beside the meat, which I had just finished cutting.

Instantly, a slap struck my head.

“Ow! What did you do that for?!”

“Because you went and ran your mouth like that! Just be grateful I waited for you to set down your knife!” Ai Fa shot back, her face bright red.

“Hey, if you start acting all bashful, it’ll only make me feel even more embarrassed.”

That comment earned me several more slaps to the head.



Was this a consequence of how open we were with each other? Well, whether it was or not, the blows she was raining down on me to hide her embarrassment had enough force behind them that they were threatening to give me a concussion.

“H-Hey, cut it out! If you keep hitting me, I’m gonna have trouble working tomorrow!”

“Quiet, you! Just hurry up and cook the food already!”

And so, another night at the Fa house wrapped up peacefully.

Chapter 2: Sleepover at the Ruu Settlement

1

It was now the seventh of the silver month, two days after our trip to the castle town.

At this point, the post town had settled back down a good bit. Though with that said, the reverberations from the revival festival still hadn't fully petered out. A huge number of travelers were still leaving Genos along the highway, so with all the totes and wagons they were taking with them, traffic was still pretty heavy. That meant we were remaining pretty busy, with plenty of customers wanting to enjoy our giba cooking one last time.

On the day of the downfall we had sold 1,410 servings, whereas now we were hovering at around 1,000, and with the way things were going today, we weren't going to have any trouble hitting that benchmark again.

We were sticking with having two people per stall, but had reduced the number manning the outdoor restaurant from five to three. The clans under the Ruu and the other smaller clans all wanted to continue working, so we had decided to rotate our lineup each day. We had a total of thirteen chefs and seven hunters acting as guards on duty. That was what it took to manage five stalls and eighty-four seats.

Once things fully calmed down in town, the guards would no longer be necessary. But we wouldn't have much use for the tables and chairs if we brought them back to the settlement at the forest's edge, so as long as the number of customers we were seeing didn't seriously drop off, we were planning to keep our outdoor restaurant at its current size.

Of course, we were probably going to get rid of the section that was just a canopy with no tables when our next contract renewal rolled around. After all, eighty-four seats would be plenty when everything was running normally, and we already didn't have that many people overflowing into the extra space.

Even so, we were still selling over a thousand meals, which was more than double the amount of business we did when we first opened the outdoor restaurant. However, we had already been selling 860 servings per day when we expanded our restaurant for the revival festival, so my prediction was that we were going to drop back down to somewhere in the range of five hundred to eight hundred per day after this.

“All right, we’re off. But we expect to be back here in Genos in half a year’s time.”

“Don’t go closing down while we’re gone, okay?”

A pair of customers whose names I didn’t even know were saying their farewells with smiles on their faces.

It was impossible to know what would happen in the future, but my reply was an honest one. “I hope to see you again when you return.”

One particularly interesting group came by shortly before the lower first hour. They were a party of easterners with their faces hidden by the hoods of their leather cloaks. The person standing at the head of the group was on the small side, and when she flicked back her hood, she revealed herself to be the star reader Arishuna, who was a guest of the castle.

“Hey, Arishuna. I haven’t seen you since the taste testing at the end of the year.”

“Yes, it has been a while, Asuta.”

It had been ten days since we had last met, and probably more than half a month since she had visited our stalls. She had been busy during the revival festival, so she hadn’t had many opportunities to leave the castle town.

“Have things finally settled down? I hear you’ve been working really hard.” I hadn’t really asked about the details, but she had to have been incredibly busy, taking tons of requests from the nobles visiting Genos to read the stars for them. I couldn’t see any signs of fatigue on her expressionless face, but I still sensed that it must have been pretty exhausting. “Also, today happens to be a giba curry day. I was going to give some to Yang later for delivery, but what do you want to do? Would you rather eat it here?”

“Yes. Since I am here, I would like, to do so.”

“Then, what about the tableware you left with us? If you don’t need the delivery later, should we just return it to you now?” I asked.

In response, Arishuna moved closer, remaining expressionless all the while. “I cannot leave, the castle town, each day. If possible, I would like to continue, to have your cooking, delivered... Would that be too much, of an imposition on you, Asuta?”

“No. As I said before, I just hand over the food to someone at Tanto’s Blessing, so it’s no trouble at all. It’s Yang and his people who are putting in the effort.”

“I give them, my thanks. And if necessary, I will repay them, appropriately. I hope that we, can continue, with this arrangement.”

“Yeah, got it,” I replied, and then I glanced over her slender shoulder. “So, who are they? Are they with you, Arishuna?”

“Yes. I was asked, to guide them here. They are, merchants from Sym.”

After she said that, an especially tall member of the group stepped forward.

“It is a pleasure to meet you. I am the leader of the Black Flight Feathers, Kukuluel Gi Adumuftan,” he stated, introducing himself as he pulled back his leather hood. The face that appeared from underneath was that of a middle-aged easterner.

He looked to be over forty and had a long face, slender eyes, a high-bridged nose, and thin lips. He didn’t have either a beard or a mustache, unlike most men from Selva or Jagar, and he wore his long black hair tied off in a single bundle in the back. Though his face was expressionless, his eyes were sharp, and he had a strong aura of competence about him.

“Oh, so you’re the leader of the merchant group that made that crazy proposal?” Ludo Ruu remarked as he casually strode over from his post guarding a neighboring stall. Though we had a lot more hunters whose names I didn’t know on guard duty lately, either Ludo or Darmu Ruu were always among them to take charge. “I’m Ludo Ruu, the youngest son of the main house of one of the leading clans from the forest’s edge. So, what brings you here?”

“I came here to eat, as Arishuna has told me how wonderful some of the dishes sold in the post town are. And when I heard that the people of the forest’s edge were the ones selling them, I naturally had to stop by and introduce myself.”

“Huh. Not that it really matters one way or the other, but you sure are skilled with your words. This is the first time I’ve ever heard anyone from Sym speak so smoothly in the western tongue.”

“That is because I’ve been traveling to the west since I was young, for over thirty years now.” Kukuluel bowed to us after he finished speaking. I thought he seemed kind of similar to Ryada Ruu, and I could easily imagine Shumiral becoming someone like this years from now. In short, I found him to be a fascinating person.

He continued, “Duke Genos sent us a messenger with your response to our proposal not long ago. I wish to thank you for taking it under active consideration.”

“It’s too early to be thanking us yet. I’m pretty sure the message should have only said that we weren’t going to turn you down without hearing you out first.”

“Correct. But I’m sure it must have been a difficult decision for you people of the forest’s edge to make, so I wished to express my gratitude. Nobody would be pleased to have a road carved through the land where they live, after all.” No matter how fluent of a speaker he might have been, it seemed you could still never sense any emotions from an easterner. However, there was a strong will behind his calm and relaxed voice, just like with the light shining in his eyes. “The ability to keep doing business as we have up until now would be very convenient for both us and the townsfolk. But it isn’t a particularly beneficial proposal for the hunters of the forest’s edge, and it was not easy for me to make such an unreasonable request either.”

“Well, we *are* technically citizens of Genos. We can’t exactly just ignore the lord of the land... Besides, if goods stop getting delivered from Sym, we won’t be able to make curry anymore, so it’s not like we can say this has nothing to do with us,” Ludo Ruu said with a casual shrug, and then he shot Kukuluel a grin.

“Anyway, it’s kind of a relief to know that it was a guy like you who came up with that crazy idea. If it had been someone who seemed like a person we couldn’t have confidence in, my old man and the others probably would have had a lot of trouble trying to figure out what to do about this.”

“I’m honored,” Kukuluel said with a bow. Then his gaze turned toward the stall next to mine. The giba curry, which Ludo Ruu had been eating earlier, was being sold there under Toor Deen’s supervision. “I can tell from the scent alone that this is a wonderful dish. Would you sell some to us as well?”

“Of course. There’s seating over that way, so please take your time enjoying it.”

Kukuluel stepped away with the five members of his group, and one of them placed an order with Toor Deen.

Now that we had the members of this new merchant group from Sym buying food from us, I found myself thinking about Shumiral. There was still another month or so left until the Silver Vase would return to Genos.

“I know Sym’s a gigantic country, but how well do all the merchant groups who come from the east know each other?” I asked, trying to follow up on the reminder of my absent friend.

In response, Kukuluel calmly stared my way. “I would have at least heard of any merchant groups that have made a name for themselves. It’s important to be aware of such groups in order to make sure business proceeds smoothly.”

“I see. I happen to be good friends with a merchant group called the Silver Vase.”

“The Silver Vase... I’m aware of that name. If I recall correctly, they are a group of around ten led by a man belonging to the Zi.”

“The Zi?”

“Yes. The people of the Zi and the Gi live in the plains of Sym, which is where most of those who leave our country to conduct trade come from.”

Now that he mentioned it, I had heard that Sym was divided up into seven tribes ruling over their own domains.

“If I remember correctly, I’m pretty sure their leader did have a Zi in his name. Shumiral Zi...something. So does that mean you’re one of the Gi?” I asked.

“Yes. The Zi and Gi rule the plains together, so the bond between us is an especially strong one among the tribes of Sym. There are seven people from the Zi in my own group.”

“I see. Your group is pretty big, isn’t it?”

“The Black Flight Feathers consists of thirty-two members in total.”

That made them more than three times the size of the Silver Vase. But I figured that they would probably have a lot of trouble transporting ten gyama all the way here if they hadn’t been that large.

“By the way, where were you born, Arishuna?” I asked the star reader, who had remained silent all this time, only for her to almost stagger in response.

“My name is Arishuna Zi Mafraluda... I believe, I told you that, when we first met.”

“S-Sorry. I’m bad at memorizing long names... So then, that means you come from the same place as my friend.”

However, Arishuna’s grandfather had angered the Zi sovereign and been exiled from his homeland. I couldn’t help but worry a little bit about whether that would cause some discord when Shumiral returned.

“Arishuna here is the descendant of a star reader who was exiled from the Zi domain... Her bloodline is still not permitted to set foot in Sym, but outside of the eastern kingdom, there is no reason for anyone to cause trouble over her presence,” Kukuluel interjected, as if he had heard what I was thinking. He was definitely not someone to be underestimated. “I believe the Silver Vase’s route goes from Genos to Aboof, before crossing over into Mahyudra, after which they turn around and head to the western capital of Algrad. We will be traveling directly to Algrad next, so it’s possible we will cross paths with them somewhere along the way.”

“Wow. You’re that familiar with the movements of the Silver Vase?”

“Yes, because we would end up interfering with one another’s business if we

were to visit Genos or Algrad at the same time. It takes thirty to forty days to travel from Algrad to Genos by wagon, so they should be leaving the capital fairly soon.”

In that case, in thirty to forty days Shumiral and his trading company would be returning to Genos with the goods they had purchased in the capital, while Kukuluel’s group would be going to the capital to sell their wares from Sym and Genos. And it was all thanks to people like them constantly going back and forth that we were able to procure so many different things without going anywhere.

“You do not often hear about groups that travel all the way to the north after having arrived at Genos from the south side of Morga. The Silver Vase must have even lighter wings than we do, and be rather greedy besides,” Kukuluel stated, narrowing his eyes ever so slightly. Shumiral did the exact same thing when he was happy. “I may not be personally connected with any of them, but it is a wonderful way of life we share. It suits the people of the plains, who love to travel.”

“Yeah. You know, you remind me of my friend Shumiral a little bit.”

“I’m honored to hear that. It would surely benefit them as well if we could carve a path through the forest of Morga,” Kukuluel said, his eyes gleaming brightly. “It will take us at least three months to return from Algrad, no matter how fast we try to be. If things proceed smoothly, the first stage of clearing the path should be wrapping up around then. But in any event, as I go about my travels, I will be sure to pray for all of you to be enriched by this endeavor as well.”

With that, Kukuluel and Arishuna’s group of seven headed over to the restaurant space carrying their plates of curry. Ludo Ruu watched them leave, then rubbed his nose and said, “Hmm. There seem to be a lot of folks like that from Sym. He didn’t look particularly strong, but something about him felt kind of similar to us people of the forest’s edge.”

“Yeah. I think so too.”

“That Sanjura guy was really skilled, but he was a total liar. Maybe that’s what happens when you mix blood from Sym with blood from the west.”

“I think you’re being a little too discriminatory there, Ludo Ruu. Sanjura ended

up the way he did because of his complicated upbringing.”

“Whatever. Anyway, that Shumiral guy will probably fit in with us just fine.”

Fortunately, Vina Ruu was off duty today, so she was spared from the crimson blush her brother’s words would have given her.

Had Shumiral managed to gain any new knowledge or skills that would allow him to hunt giba? Would the people of the forest’s edge accept him? And even if they did, would his wish to marry Vina Ruu come true? A month from now, we were finally going to find out.

While I was thinking about that, Fei Beim called out, “Asuta.” It was only then that I noticed our stall had a single customer in a traveler’s cloak standing in front of it.

“Ah, welcome. Would you like to order a meal?”

I was dealing with a female traveler, which was pretty unusual. Like our eastern guests, she wore a hood that covered her head very effectively, and she was also wearing something like a shawl that blocked my view of her mouth, so I was completely unable to see her face, but she looked to be around Sheera Ruu’s height and was quite slender.

“Where is that girl’s stall?”

“Huh? What?”

“I’m asked where that Myme girl is.”

Her reddish-brown eyes glared at me forcefully from under her hood. That was when I realized I was dealing with Shilly Rou, Varkas’s apprentice who I had seen just two days prior.

“I’m surprised... What are you doing in a place like this?”

“As I said, I’m looking for that Myme girl. How many times are you going to make me repeat myself?”

Ai Fa silently stepped forward from her post in the back. As a hunter from the forest’s edge, she was more sensitive to hostility than anyone.

“So you’re after Myme’s cooking? That’s too bad. She decided to only keep

her stall open until the violet month, which means she's already closed down."

At that, Shilly Rou's eyes shot open so wide they looked like they were about to tear at the sides.

"But why?! Didn't you say she was running a stall in the post town?!"

"Yes, but she mentioned she didn't have time to study because of that, right? So until she comes up with a new dish, she'll be taking time off and putting all her effort into her studies."

Yumi and Naudis had also shut down their stalls as of the third of the silver month. They had only ever planned to stay open until the end of the revival festival, when they could earn the highest profits. A lot of other people had thought the same way too, so the number of stalls around had fallen back to the level it had been at before the revival festival. As a result, our stalls and outdoor restaurant had all shifted south, leaving an empty expanse to the north.

At any rate, Shilly Rou placed her hands on her knees and hung her head in disappointment. "This can't be... Coming all the way out here was nothing but a waste of my precious time..."

"That's unfortunate. Would you like to try our cooking instead?"

"I'm already well aware of your skills. I just wanted to confirm my assessment of her abilities one more time," Shilly Rou shot back, turning away in a huff while still hanging her head. Her spirit was as impressive as always. She never failed to snap back at me even when she was so despondent.

"You seem pretty fixated on Myme. Is that because she's younger than you?"

"Mikel is one of the only chefs Varkas has ever acknowledged... Of course I would be curious about that girl's future."

"I see. But you've got no interest in the strange techniques of someone from overseas like me?"

Shilly Ruu lifted her head and shot me another glare.

I continued, "Well, I was just thinking that it's a bit frustrating to hear that you're willing to come all the way to the post town, but only for Myme. And it's

kind of bothering me that our relationship has been less than great so far, even though you're one of Varkas's apprentices."

"If I was able to frustrate you a little, then maybe coming out here was worth my time after all..." Shilly Rou teased, slowly straightening up. "I'm leaving. If you see that girl, give her my regards."

"Oh, Myme should be here in less than an hour. She's planning to visit the settlement at the forest's edge later today."

"The settlement at the forest's edge? But why?"

"I don't really know how to answer that. I guess you could call it a sort of social gathering?"

Yes, today we were planning on having a meetup at the Ruu settlement, with six people from town coming to visit us—the same group as last time: Dora, Tara, Yumi, Telia Mas, Mikel, and Myme.

"Would you like to participate too, Shilly Rou?"

Once again, the apprentice chef's eyes shot open wide in shock.

"Why should I ever take part in something like that? Just dragging myself out to a dusty place like this is already distressing enough!"

"Well, I've been thinking for a while that it would be nice to have folks from the castle town visit us too. And it won't just be Myme at today's gathering. Mikel will be there too."

Shilly Rou looked torn, fiddling with the hem of her cloak and bringing a hand up to her temple. Then she finally managed to force herself to say, "I cannot participate in such a suspect gathering... Besides, I need to head back soon and take care of some prep work. I slipped out during my midday break, but I don't have that much time to spare."

"I see... That's a shame. In that case, how about three days from now? That's when the main event is going to happen anyway."

We couldn't afford to spend too much time entertaining guests when we had to work the stalls tomorrow. As such, we were planning to hold a banquet on the tenth of the silver month instead, since we were going to take the next day

off.

“Why are you being so persistent about inviting me? Our relationship is far from cordial.”

“That’s because you decided to just start hating me on your own. But personally, I’d like to be as friendly with you and all of Varkas’s apprentices as I can.”

Shilly Rou once again fell silent for a while, but then she turned around with a “Hmph! Don’t expect to win me over like that. You have ensorcelled Varkas, and that makes you my enemy,” she muttered, and then she briskly jogged off down the road. “I will never soften my stance toward you!”

Did I just set one of those flags people sometimes talk about?

At any rate, Shilly Rou soon vanished into the crowd.

“That girl seems rather vexed about Varkas being so fixated on you. But frankly, I find his obsession to be abnormal as well,” Ai Fa chimed in, sounding rather displeased. “Also, you should refrain from inviting additional guests without permission from the Ruu clan, Asuta. They are the ones who will actually be hosting our visitors from town, are they not?”

“Ah, you’re right. Sorry, that was careless of me.”

“Also, you seem to once again be putting a great deal of effort into befriending a young girl.”

“Huh? No, I’m just trying to fix my relationship with someone who seriously hates me, so... Hey, listen to what I’m saying here!” But whenever this sort of thing came up, Ai Fa always refused to hear me out. My excuses fell on deaf ears, and Fei Beim started glaring at me from the side too.

“Asuta, is it true that you’re constantly trying to get to know young women?”

“No, it’s not! Only some of the time!”

“I’m just kidding. But you’ll never be able to get your point across if you let yourself become so flustered.”

Fei Beim had always been really sullen, so if she had reached a point where she felt comfortable cracking jokes, it was ultimately a good thing. That was

how I truly felt then, working in the post town early in the afternoon.

Time steadily passed on by, and eventually the lower second hour arrived. We sold all one thousand of the servings we had prepared without any issues and set about cleaning up. Just as I was thinking that Myme and the others would be showing up soon, though, someone completely different suddenly popped up: Pino from the Gamley Troupe.

“Good work, everyone. And by the way, we’re going to be counting on all of you from the forest’s edge from now on.”

This morning, the Gamley Troupe had been informed that the people of the forest’s edge had agreed to assist them with their giba hunt, and now a number of their performers were going to visit the Ruu settlement in order to work out the details.

Their meeting was going to overlap with the gathering we had planned with the townsfolk, but if we waited too long to take care of this, the number of giba in the area would increase too much, and it would become difficult to keep bringing the troupe to the forest’s edge safely. It was eventually decided that we would just briefly introduce everyone to each other. Since most of our guests were familiar with the Gamley Troupe already, we were hopeful that there wouldn’t be any major issues with this.

“We’ll follow you in our own wagon. But you’d better not get too far ahead of us, all right? That would be bullying,” Pino said with a giggle, hiding her mouth behind the sleeve of her furisode-like outfit. I felt like she had started being a lot more genuine with us since the day of the downfall.

“Are you just bringing the one wagon? Who all will be coming along?”

“Hmm? We’re only bringing four of us today: me, the troupe leader, Shantu, and Rolo. Why do you ask?”

“Well, you see, we actually have some other guests today too, so I want to make sure that everyone will get along okay.”

With the expression on her face not changing one bit, Pino gave a little tilt of her head that reminded me of a small animal. “Ah. If that’s all you’re worried about, it shouldn’t be an issue. The only members of our group who might be

frightening for the townsfolk to meet are Zan, Doga, and Zetta. And as you know, the troupe leader behaves himself when the sun is out.”

“Sorry. I know that was a rude thing to bring up. It’s not like I’m concerned about you doing anything wrong...”

It was just that Telia Mas was kind of scared of the Gamley Troupe, so I wanted to make sure everything would be all right to be on the safe side. If she even so much as laid eyes on Zan—the little guy with the mask—or the gargantuan Doga, that alone would probably be enough to scare her out of her wits.

“It’s only natural for townsfolk to dislike us. As soon as the last of the festival atmosphere is gone, we’ll be entirely out of place here.”

Their tent was still up, but they had already stopped doing business. The revival festival had fully concluded after the third of the silver month, and everyone’s purse strings had tightened up at the same time.

“Well, not that it would be different in any other town we might visit at this time of year. If we do succeed in capturing a giba, we intend to take our time traveling down south next.”

“I see. It makes me feel a little lonely to think that we’ll be saying goodbye soon.”

“And it would be best for us to leave while you still feel that way. We wouldn’t want to stick around for so long that you get sick of seeing us and start finding our presence irritating instead,” Pino remarked with a grin.

And so, shortly after that, we returned to the forest’s edge, accompanied by an unusually large number of guests.

2

We made it safely back to the Ruu settlement at half past the lower second hour.

We had four wagons transporting our comrades, while our guests rode in two. One of the wagons carrying six of our guests from town was being pulled

by a tolos that was mainly used to work Dora's fields. It seemed to be fairly old, with its dark-brown plumage looking pretty raggedy. Even so, it was an essential part of Dora's family, bringing Dora to and from town each day, and hauling the vegetables they grew to their storehouse.

"This is his first real trip in quite some time too, so he must be happy. Now then, you all take care getting down," Dora said.

Their wagon was meant for transporting vegetables and had no roof. Tara and Yumi stepped down from its cargo bed, and Rimee Ruu immediately hurried over to them after exiting Ruuru's wagon. It was no surprise that she was so excited. She was finally getting the sleepover she had wanted for a long time. Tara and Rimee Ruu clasped each other's hands tightly and beamed at each other with smiles so similar that they almost looked like sisters.

A box carriage had also come to a stop a small distance away, and the members of the Gamley Troupe promptly appeared from inside: first, Shantu (who had been holding the reins), then Pino, Rolo, and Gamley. The traveling performers had finally come to the forest's edge.

"Welcome to the Ruu settlement, dear guests. I must say, it's been far too long. Our family owes all of you from the Daleim lands a great debt," Mia Lea Ruu said in greeting as she approached us with a smile.

Dora smiled back at her while holding the reins of his tolos and replied, "Not at all. We did have a bunch of you over during the revival festival just a few days ago. Not that I'm saying we're visiting you today because we want you to repay us for that."

"Oh, of course not. We don't have much to offer in the way of hospitality, but please make yourselves at home. After all, there's going to be a lot more people from the other clans around during your next visit."

Three days from now, on the tenth of the silver month, we were throwing a banquet with twenty people from the Ruu's subordinate clans planning to attend. We were having it on that day because we had the next day off from our work at the stalls, which would allow the members of the Ruu clan plenty of leeway to host such a large event.

As for why we had invited our guests from town to come over today in

addition to having them join us for the banquet, that was because we had spent the night in the Daleim lands four times recently, so only having them over once in return wouldn't be good enough to repay them—or so Rimee Ruu had firmly insisted, and Mia Lea and Donda Ruu hadn't really offered any objections to the idea.

Dora and Tara expressed their gratitude, followed by Yumi and Myme. Meanwhile, at some point Sheera Ruu had walked over to stand next to Telia Mas, seemingly having a calming effect on the timid girl. It was heartwarming to see them interact like this.

I turned toward the Gaaz woman holding Fafa's reins. "Please give everyone my thanks. Oh, and Ai Fa..."

"Right. As the head of the Fa clan, I grant the women assisting Asuta in his work permission to open the Fa house's door and go inside."

"Thank you. Well then, see you tomorrow."

Among the chefs from our part of the forest, only Toor Deen and Yun Sudra were staying here. The others would be meeting up with the Fou and Ran women waiting at the Fa house to make curry base and pasta, as well as to cook poitan. The base level of cooking skill they now had was high enough that the other veterans and I no longer needed to help out with that kind of work.

Our plan was to take care of the meat cutting here at the Ruu settlement first, then spend any excess time we had on a study session—the first we'd been able to do in a while. We wouldn't be returning home until after dinner.

"So, you're the traveling performers I've heard so much about?" Mia Lea Ruu asked, turning toward Pino and company as Yamiru Lea and Ama Min Rutim departed with Fafa's wagon. "I am Mia Lea Ruu, wife of our clan head, Donda Ruu. I'm the one in charge of the women here at the Ruu settlement, at least supposedly, so I hope you'll remember my name."

"How polite. The name's Gamley. I'm the troupe leader of these traveling performers. These three are Pino, Shantu, and Rolo."

Gamley gave a theatrical bow, even though his eyes kept blinking weakly in the sunlight. Meanwhile, Ludo Ruu's group had gotten down from the wagons

and casually dispersed, while the women working around the branch houses nearby and their children stared at the visitors with eyes open wide.

Gamley was dressed in dazzling crimson attire and only had one arm and one eye. Pino had her hair in a braid that came down to her legs and was wearing what looked like a vermilion furisode. Shantu was a white-haired old man in gray clothes that looked like rags. The three of them were really attention-grabbing. Rolo, on the other hand, was kind of hiding in their shadows, her appearance being completely unremarkable aside from being dressed like a man.

“There’s quite a crowd here today, so let’s finish greeting each other outside of the house. I’ll summon the clan head, so please wait out front.”

With many interested gazes still following those four, we went ahead and crossed the plaza together.

Though this was the Gamley Troupe’s first time coming here, they didn’t show much interest in the settlement or the people around them and just silently walked onward. The timid Rolo did look oddly nervous, however. And despite being guests themselves, Dora and the other local townsfolk kept glancing at the members of the Gamley Troupe as we walked along. Dora aside, everyone here had visited their tent and should have been familiar with them already, except for Rolo, who was currently out of costume.

Gamley really did seem to have a hard time dealing with sunlight, while Pino and Shantu had a way of drawing people’s gazes just by walking along. It wasn’t just their unusual appearances that made it hard to take your eyes off them. Something about them just felt different from the townsfolk. They seemed like a totally natural part of the scene when there was a festival going on, but in normal times like these, they looked like a bunch of weirdos and misfits.

“Ah, you’re here? Welcome back,” Donda Ruu called out, emerging from the main house after having been summoned by Mia Lea Ruu. His left shoulder was wrapped in bandages and his arm was suspended in a sling, but he seemed just as formidable as always. With his blazingly bright blue eyes, the leading clan head of the forest’s edge looked over the ten guests standing in front of his house. “There’s no need for any of you to introduce yourselves. Let me start by

giving thanks to you, Dora of the Daleim lands, for taking care of my clan members and comrades. For the rest of today and tomorrow morning, we would be honored to have you as our guest.”

“Thank you, Donda Ruu. My daughter Tara is delighted as well.”

Tara smiled bashfully, still holding hands with Rimee Ruu. Donda Ruu offered Dora a firm nod, and then turned to regard the Gamleys.

“It has been some time since we’ve met as well, traveling performers. I welcome you to the settlement at the forest’s edge, as ordered by Duke Marstein Genos.”

“You have our gratitude, leading clan head Donda Ruu. We swear not to disturb the peace here at the forest’s edge and simply ask that you guide us to the giba,” Gamley said with another affected bow.

Glancing at the performers suspiciously, Donda Ruu snorted, “Hmph. Hunters at the forest’s edge enter the forest when the sun hits its peak. If you wish for us to accompany you, then you will be waiting until that time tomorrow.”

“As you say... But there are one or two things I’d like to ask. Would it be possible for all of us to stay here at your homestead from tomorrow until we capture our giba?”

“What?” Donda Ruu said, glaring intensely. “There are thirteen of you, aren’t there? We don’t have enough spare houses to host you all, and I can’t see why we should have to go to that much trouble to look after you to begin with.”

“Oh, no, our seven wagons are our homes, so a place to leave them would be plenty. Even the corner of this plaza off to the side of the path would do. I swear that we won’t go prowling about on our own or doing anything to disturb the fine folks who dwell here,” Gamley said, breaking out in a cheerful smile. “Only four of our number will go out hunting giba. The rest of us will wait patiently for their return from noon until dusk, as we won’t be earning much in the way of coins right after the end of the festival. And I don’t want to split us up too much. The thirteen of us are like family, after all.”

“Hmph. Sounds like it’s just for your own convenience... So, who will those four be? Anyone who goes after a giba halfheartedly is sure to lose their life.”

“The three of us here today besides myself will be entering the forest, alongside the beastman Zetta. You remember him, right? The one you all thought might be a red savage of Morga.”

“What?” Donda Ruu growled. “Never mind your beastman. You’re saying you’re going to bring a girl like her and an old man into the forest? Don’t you have someone strong enough to compete with Ji Maam among your number?”

“Ah, you mean Doga. He may be big, but he’s gentle in nature and not really suited to hunting giba.”

I was surprised to hear that. Doga and Zan seemed so strong, and yet they were being left behind, while Pino and the others would be heading into the forest.

“Ah, but allow me to correct myself. We would like to have those four and three of our animals enter the forest. A gaaje leopard, an algura silver lion, and a black vamda ape.”

“You intend to bring outside animals into the forest of Morga?”

“Yes, which is why we need to have Pino and Shantu come along. They’re the only ones who can talk to them, after all.”

Donda Ruu’s eyes were blazing intensely as they glared at Gamley.

Gamley, meanwhile, was just smiling away with his right eye fixed on the leaning clan head.

“Our animals would never attack a human, so you have nothing to be concerned about. And they would hardly just die, even if they are attacked by a giba, wouldn’t you agree? Oh, and of course they won’t consume the fruits of the forest either. I know that would be a terrible breach of the laws of Genos.”

“Ludo,” Donda Ruu grumbled, calling for his son. “Send a hunter to the castle town. Get them to ask for a decision from Melfried as to whether or not those animals are permitted to enter the forest of Morga.”

“Understood.”

Ludo Ruu looked over the hunters who had come along with us as guards and picked out the oldest man among them. If I remembered correctly, he belonged

to a Lea branch house.

The man took up Jidura's reins after the tolos had been released from its wagon and left the settlement in a hurry. And as he watched the hunter depart, Gamley stroked his goatlike beard.

"Guess we should have gone over this in advance. My apologies for the trouble."

"This whole matter is nothing but trouble. You're having us play along with an asinine notion like capturing a live giba to make it perform tricks!" Donda Ruu replied so forcefully that Yumi's shoulders started trembling as she stood next to me. "Let me just say, a large number of giba will be returning to the forest in this area soon. Once that happens, we won't have any more time to devote to your nonsense. So you will either succeed in your foolish ambition before then, or you will give up on it and leave Genos empty-handed."

"Yes, we intend to complete the task in the next few days. And we will be happy to show you all the amusing tricks our giba will be able to perform when the next revival festival rolls around."

With that, their conversation came to a close.

Donda Ruu turned to leave, but then Pino called out, "Um... This is a personal request of my own, but would it be possible to observe how you all live here, at least a little bit?"

Donda Ruu turned and sent the girl an incredibly displeased glare.

Pino brought her sleeves together in front of her chest and tilted her head in a childlike way. "We'll be heading into the forest starting tomorrow with the nobles' permission, so we won't have time to take it easy and see how you live at that point. I can't help but find that a little disappointing, since I've been interested in the people of the forest's edge for some time now."

After thinking about it for a moment, Donda Ruu grumbled, "Do as you please. But I will not permit you to walk around on your own. Ludo, you take responsibility for keeping an eye on them."

"Got it. I just need to watch them until they return to town, right?"

“Yes, that will be plenty,” Donda Ruu said, turning his back to us again and vanishing into the house.

Then, Gamley turned toward Pino. “Hey, what’s this about observing the settlement? I’ve been so tired this whole time that I can hardly think straight.”

“You can go sleep in the wagon. All you’re gonna do when we make it back to town is sleep anyway, so it’s all the same, right?”

“That’s certainly true. Well then, you all take care.”

With a large yawn and an unsteady stride, Gamley returned to their wagon. Instantly, Ludo Ruu signaled with his eyes for one of the hunters to follow him.

Apparently, Gamley was the only one who was heading back to their carriage, as Shantu remained where he was with a smile fixed on his face and Rolo was timidly glancing left and right.

Mia Lea Ruu looked the three of them over with her arms crossed. “Hmm. I’ve heard about you from Jiza, young miss. Just what is it that you want to see?”

“Just as I said, I want to see how you live. Your other guests are here at the forest’s edge for the same reason, aren’t they? I’d just like to observe a bit from off to the side.”

Pino seemed to be quite skilled at creeping her way into the hearts of others. Even though it was impossible to tell what kind of person she actually was, even Jiza Ruu had relaxed his guard around her. There was naturally no way someone as bighearted as Mia Lea Ruu would ever refuse.

As a result, we ended up heading to the kitchen with an unexpectedly large group: five chefs, five hunters acting as guards, nine guests, and Sufira Zaza, who had been silently accompanying us this whole time. With Mia Lea Ruu joining us as well, that made for a group of twenty-one in total.

Rolo seemed to be more comfortable staying with Pino than going with her sleeping troupe leader, so she bobbed along at the tail of the group. No matter how many times I saw her, I still had a hard time believing that she was as tough as Shin Ruu.

“Welcome, everyone, to the Ruu house.”

Reina Ruu and several others were currently doing prep work for tomorrow in the kitchen, though they seemed to be wrapping up now, as Granny Tito Min was putting out the flames under the stoves.

“Hey, these people wanna watch some cooking!” Rimee Ruu announced.

“Is that so?” Reina Ruu said with a polite bow. Apparently, having Pino, Shantu, and Rolo there wasn’t enough to put her on guard. “We’ve already started cleaning up here. Asuta, once your group is done with work, you’re going to do a cooking lesson, right? It’s been a while.”

“I’d say it’s more like we’ll be looking at some new ingredients. I think it would be good to try a couple things with the stuff we brought back.”

“I’m very much looking forward to it. I still don’t know much about how to use herbs and the like when you’re not around to help.”

After that, we did another round of introductions with our guests. Reina and Vina Ruu were there, as were Granny Tito Min and a couple women from the branch houses, some of whom had participated in the banquet on the day of the downfall.

Pino and her troupemates stood silently outside the door to the kitchen, watching us work and not intruding. As I listened to the pleasant chatter filling the air, I instructed Toor Deen and Yun Sudra on what I needed them to do, and we got to work on preparations for tomorrow.

“By the way, where is Lala Ruu?” Dora cheerfully asked.

Reina Ruu replied, “Lala is gathering firewood at the edge of the forest with some women from the branch houses right now. After all, it never goes to waste no matter how much we collect.”

“I see. You people of the forest’s edge sure are hard workers. The revival festival only just ended... We’ve just been tending to our fields a bit in the morning, but taking it easy otherwise. This is the only time of year we can relax this much.”

As everyone was talking, women from the other houses kept popping in to greet Dora, Yumi, and the others. They must have participated in the banquet in the Daleim lands too. Though I didn’t know their names, it really warmed my

heart to see them enjoying themselves while chatting with our guests from town.

“Hey there! It’s been a while, hasn’t it, Myme?”

“Oh, Barthia! You look lovely today!”

“Well, I’ve got no reason to wear armor around the settlement,” Barthia said with a hearty chuckle as she approached, clad in the attire of the forest’s edge. Myme had stopped doing business after the day of the downfall, so it must have been seven days or so since those two had last seen one another.

“I’ve cleaned up around the house a bit, so we should have room for around five of you to sleep there.”

“Thank you! I’m really looking forward to it!”

Tara had promised to sleep next to Rimee Ruu in the main house, but everyone else was going to stay the night in the house where Barthia and Jeeda lived. If Dora was going to be sharing a room with the deeply unsociable Mikel and Jeeda, I had to wonder what they would end up talking about. I honestly wouldn’t have minded getting a chance to see that.

At any rate, time steadily passed on by, and around when we finished our preparations, the final member of our cast appeared.

I let out a surprised “Huh?” while Sufira Zaza’s eyes began to gleam from her position standing up against the wall. After all, it was none other than Lem Dom jauntily standing there at the entrance to the kitchen.

“Why are you here, Lem Dom? Weren’t you supposed to have dinner with the Sudra because we’re not eating at home tonight?”

Though she was a woman, Lem Dom was nearly 180 centimeters tall and struck an imposing figure as she stood there adorned with giba bones. I saw her every day, but this was the first time in a good while that we had met at the Ruu settlement. Had she run all the way here from the area around the Fa and Sudra houses? I could see her muscular chest rising and falling just a bit, but then she gave us a daring grin.

“Don’t worry. I have no intention of intruding. This girl here is the one I came

to meet.”

“Huh? Wh-Who, me?” Rolo shrieked in amazement. Her powerless gaze rather pathetically shifted about, as if she thought there must have been some sort of mistake.

“One of the Gaaz women told me what you looked like, and I came running. You’re that girl Ludo Ruu mentioned, right? The one who’s as strong as the top eight from the Ruu clan.”

I hadn’t seen her here in quite a while, but Lem Dom still came by to help Jeeda and Bartha hunt wild birds early in the morning. She must have talked to Ludo Ruu then, as he was a surprisingly early riser.

“I find it hard to believe you could be that strong, looking at you now. But I suppose that’s just because of my lack of experience... Hey, why not have a contest of strength with me? I’ll do whatever I can to repay you for the favor.”

“A-A contest of strength?! Pino, what should I do about this?!”

Obviously, Pino didn’t understand why this was happening either.

When Lem Dom saw the acrobat’s questioning gaze, she smiled boldly and earnestly said, “I want to build up experience as a hunter.”

“How should we be handling this?” Pino asked Ludo Ruu, who simply shrugged.

“Just go ahead and do as you please. Lem Dom belongs to a different clan. The Ruu clan decided not to get involved with her desire to become a hunter either way.”

“Oh? So does she have a bad relationship with the Ruu clan?”

“I won’t call our relationship good or bad, but all people of the forest’s edge are our comrades.”

“I see,” Pino said, letting her wide sleeves flutter like birds as she turned back to Lem Dom. “In that case, do whatever you want with her. You are, of course, not talking about anything that will lead to bloodshed, are you?”

“A contest of strength doesn’t involve anything like that. Your strongman already did one with somebody from the Maam, right?”

“You mean pole tugging? Or a shoving contest? Well, whatever you have in mind, I don’t particularly care how you treat her, as long as it doesn’t result in any injuries.”

“Hey, Pino!”

“Oh, be quiet. We need to repay our debt to the people of the forest’s edge, right? So stop grumbling and go get tossed about.”

And so, the armorless knight king Rolo was dragged off to act as Lem Dom’s training partner.

“Hey, don’t go so far that we can’t see you.”

“Got it... Thanks, Ludo Ruu,” Lem Dom said, with her honest gratitude surprisingly audible in her voice.

Ludo Ruu had a bright smile on his face as he waved her off. I did feel bad for Rolo, but we couldn’t step away from our work, so all I could do was shrug in response to the shouts of “Gyah!” and “Eek!” that started filtering in to us from outside.

“H-Hey, is this really all right, Ludo Ruu?”

“Yeah. Lem Dom’s gotten a lot more hunter-like in her movements, so we don’t have to worry about her getting injured.”

“Getting injured? Not doing the injuring?”

“If we had any reason to worry about that, she would’ve long since been accepted as a hunter.”

Despite what I was hearing, was Lem Dom actually the one getting completely beaten down out there? Well, if Ai Fa’s assessment was correct and Rolo really was as strong as Shin Ruu, that would be exactly the outcome I’d expect.

Yumi and Myme seemed interested and peered outside of the kitchen, but soon returned with their eyebrows drooping.

“That was amazing. It was like acrobatics...”

“Yeah. But I don’t like that kind of fighting.”

Honestly, I didn’t enjoy watching it much either. Sufira Zaza cared greatly for

Lem Dom, but she was unable to go outside right now because she needed to do her duty, so she had closed her eyes and looked to be praying.

Out of curiosity, I looked over at Ai Fa, who was leaning against the wall calmly with her arms crossed.

“You’re not gonna watch, Ai Fa?”

“There’s no need to, and it’s not something I should be doing either.”

“I see.”

Ai Fa’s match with Lem Dom was fast approaching. Would Lem Dom be able to claim her place as a hunter? I couldn’t help but wonder that as I wrapped up my work while listening to Rolo’s endless shrieks and wild cries.

3

“Sorry for the wait, everyone. It’s finally time to get started on our first study session in quite a while.”

The sliced meat was placed in leather bags stuffed with pico leaves and temporarily stowed in the pantry, so I was finally able to make that declaration.

According to the sundial, it would soon be the fourth hour. Preparations for dinner were also mostly done, which left us with two whole hours for our study session.

“Let’s go ahead and start with this,” I said, grabbing a cloth bag that I had left in the corner of my workstation and emptying its contents onto a wooden plate. Instantly, a fragrant aroma filled the kitchen. The ingredient in question was gigi leaves, which I had roasted yesterday at the Fa house.

“My, what a wonderful aroma! Who knew that gigi leaves alone could give off such a scent.”

“Yeah, they don’t seem like they would be all that bitter just from the smell, right?”

It was a cacao-like aroma that called to mind chocolate or cocoa. The roasted gigi leaves had turned jet black. They had started out as round leaves around

five centimeters in diameter, but after being heated for a while, their fibers had broken down, leaving them in a half-crumbled state already.

“Apparently, they’re usually used as an ingredient for making tea. It’s quite bitter, so would you all like to try it too?” I asked Dora and the other guests.

“You don’t mind? Herbs from Sym aren’t exactly cheap, are they?”

“It doesn’t take all that much if you just want to have a taste. Besides, it’s not like it’s an especially expensive herb.”

Moreover, Varkas had been withholding information on the proper techniques to use it, so the pantry in the old Turan manor still had a mountain of the stuff in stock. If we could find a good use for them, Torst and Polarth would be absolutely thrilled about it.

However, all of the chefs and guests who tasted it frowned. In contrast to their mellow and fragrant aroma, the gigi leaves proved to be bitter like concentrated cacao.

“Varkas made that delicious food using an herb this bitter? I can’t even imagine what sort of dish it would work well in,” Sheera Ruu remarked, looking rather discouraged. Reina Ruu had a pretty glum expression.

“I still haven’t thought up a way to use it in my cooking either. Just like I discussed the other day, though, I’d like to give it a try in sweets first,” I said.

“Huh? I don’t want any bitter sweets!” Rimee Ruu complained.

“Obviously, nobody would enjoy a sweet that was bitter and nothing else. But arow and sheel are pretty sour, right? And yet, you can still use them to make something delicious if you combine them with a sweet ingredient like sugar. So I’m thinking of something like that.”

To start with, we heated up some karon milk, then added sugar and powdered gigi leaves. It started to look even more like cocoa, but to anyone who didn’t know what that was, it would probably just look like a brown liquid. In fact, because of how black and dark brown colors were associated with burnt food, they probably just thought it looked bitter.

Wanting to break down their preconceptions, I checked the taste multiple

times while adding more and more sugar. Of course, turning an herb that happens to smell like cacao into cocoa wasn't going to be as easy as dissolving the leaves in milk. There was a whole process involved in making cocoa from cacao, and besides, we were dealing with gigi leaves here. No matter how much sugar and milk I added, it just wouldn't be possible to recreate that characteristic deep, mellow flavor.

But by pairing it with the sweetness of karon milk and sugar, I was able to make a curious drink that at least seemed cocoa-like. It had the sort of cheap flavor you might expect to find at a candy store. But even still, at least the bitterness of the gigi leaves had been covered up, and they seemed to have pretty good harmony with the sugar and milk, so perhaps if you didn't know what real cocoa tasted like, it wouldn't seem like anything was off about it.

"What do you all think? I'd say it's not half bad," I said, moving the contents of the small pot to some dishes and passing them around to everyone.

Rimee Ruu hesitated, but Toor Deen gathered her resolve and picked up a spoon. The young chef really did seem to be the most passionate person of all when it came to making sweets. And as soon as she took a little slurp, her eyes started sparkling brightly.

"So tasty! And it's really sweet too!"

"Well, I did add a ton of sugar."

Rimee Ruu and Tara went ahead and grabbed their own spoons, and they pretty quickly started looking even more overjoyed than Toor Deen. Yun Sudra and Sufira Zaza followed suit shortly after. It looked like all the sweet teeth in our group were quite happy with it.

"This is delicious! And all you did was add karon milk and sugar!"

"Ooh, yes, it's remarkably sweet and tasty... Still, slurping it is one thing, but are you aiming to serve people a drink this sweet as if it were some kind of tea?" Dora chimed in, showing a bit of disappointment.

"No," I replied with a shake of my head. "This is ultimately just an ingredient for desserts. Toor Deen, how would you go about using it?"

"Huh...? What about kneading it into poitan or fuwano?"

“Yeah, that would be the most direct way to do it. Why don’t we go ahead and try combining it with baked poitan once it cools down? In the meantime, we have a couple other things to take care of,” I said, picking up a jar that was down on the floor by my feet. It contained some additional karon milk, and had been left in the Ruu pantry since yesterday. After having been allowed to sit for a night, a noticeable amount of fat had floated to the top. I carefully scooped it out, then sealed the jar again and called out to my beloved clan head standing by the entrance, “Ai Fa, could I ask you to shake this a bit like before?”

Ai Fa shot me a doubtful look, but went ahead and accepted the jar. It had been several months since we had last done this, but we were finally making whipped cream again. This was basically how milk fat was produced too, but Mikel had taught us an alternative technique to make whipped cream, by packing the liquid into a large leather bag and pummeling it with a stick, so it had been quite a while since we had done things this way.

The process would have taken me seven or eight minutes, but it could be done in half the time if I asked Ai Fa to do it instead. She held the jar with one of her hands on the stopper to ensure that it didn’t come loose and silently started shaking the vessel vigorously.

In the meantime, I had Toor Deen cool off the pseudo-cocoa using water from a jug, and then told her to knead it into some poitan flour. It started looking a lot like cocoa powder, and eventually it turned into a dark brown poitan batter. After tasting it, Toor Deen added a bit more karon milk and sugar, carefully kneaded it a little longer, and then started cooking it on a metal tray.

I took the thoroughly shaken jar back from Ai Fa and emptied the contents onto a wooden dish, along with some more sugar and gigi leaves. Then I whipped it up with a pair of long chopsticks, creating a version of whipped cream that was only slightly off from what I considered ideal.

I also used the skim milk to make custard cream by mixing it together with some sugar, fuwano flour and gigi leaves, plus a couple egg yolks. Then I added a bit of milk fat, but only a spoonful so that the custard wouldn’t be too rich. After that, I just had to heat it for a while to boil off the moisture, and it was done.

We had now made baked poitan, whipped cream, and custard cream with gigi leaves. Rimee Ruu and the other young girls all had stars in their eyes, and they hadn't even tasted our new confections yet.

"Mmm, delicious! It's not bitter at all! Or, maybe it is? I don't know, but it's really tasty!"

"It is, isn't it? I could happily eat a whole lot more."

Yun Sudra and Sufira Zaza looked just as delighted as the younger crowd. Telia Mas seemed surprised, while Myme, Reina Ruu, and Sheera Ruu all had serious expressions on their faces. Yumi and Vina Ruu didn't appear to be completely satisfied, though.

"Would you like a taste too, Pino?" I called out, only for her to answer me with a rather conflicted smile.

"We forced you to let us stay here, so won't it anger the forest if you keep being so charitable to us?"

"I don't think the mother forest is that petty. And I did make sure to whip up enough for everyone."

Besides, Rolo hadn't returned yet, so it was just Pino and Shantu here. The two traveling performers were still a little hesitant, but they did finally go ahead and reach out for the baked poitan.

"Oh my... It's surprisingly sweet."

"This is wonderful. And I can still sense the aroma of gigi tea about it," Shantu commented with a smile. He was a good-natured old man with a white beard that hung all the way down to his chest. He seemed to be an unusually mellow guy compared to the other traveling performers.

"You've had gigi tea before, haven't you, Shantu? It must be really bitter, right?" Pino asked.

"It is. But if you skimp on the tea leaves, it just turns out dull. Bitterness is what defines gigi tea." These were traveling performers who had journeyed all the way into the far-off reaches of Sym and back. That made their opinions about these new sweets really valuable to me.

“Of course, if you use gigi leaves in everything, all the different delicious flavors would start fighting each other, right? It might be even better to spread gigi cream on a normal sweet, or make a gigi sweet with ordinary cream on top,” Toor Deen humbly yet firmly stated.

I turned toward her and nodded. “Right. And anyway, there’s still plenty of room to experiment with the amount of gigi leaves we use. Especially with cooked sweets and custard cream, where the flavor changes after heating... I’d like to leave it up to you to figure out the proper proportions, Toor Deen.”

“Huh? M-Me?”

“Yeah. They say people do better at the things they enjoy. There are a ton of other ingredients that need my attention, so I’d like to leave the sweet-making up to you and Rimee Ruu.”

It was easy to see how nervous and yet excited the young chef was as she nodded back to me and said, “I understand.”

“I’ll be looking for other ways to use them too. Making a dessert out of these leaves might have been my idea, but I want you to see it to fruition, Toor Deen. I think that would be the most effective way to go about this. And of course, I’d love it if you would think about other recipes they could be used in as well.”

A new way to use the leaves had already popped into my mind while I was making the gigi-flavored custard cream. A way to create a kind of pseudo-chocolate. It would be difficult to manage without any means of refrigeration, but I got the feeling that this would let me get even closer to the chocolate flavor I knew.

“I see. Sweet making, huh? Are you making these for the nobles?” Dora asked.

“I’m not sure,” I replied, cocking my head. “Of course, the nobles have asked us to make sweets for them before, but I want to prioritize the people of the forest’s edge. As you can see, plenty of folks here like them too.”

“Ah, I see. In that case, what about the post town? I don’t think I would go out of my way to spend money on them for myself, but Tara seems to enjoy them a lot.”

I was interested in that question too. There never seemed to be very many women and children among the travelers who visited Genos—some visited from nearby towns, but they virtually never came from Sym or Jagar. That was simply because of how dangerous long trips were in this world. As such, virtually all of the women and children who came to our stalls were residents of Genos, so Yumi and Telia Mas were the ones I had to ask for their thoughts on the matter.

“Hmm. I’m not sure. If I wanted to buy something, I’d probably go with a meat dish. And these don’t seem like the kind of side dish I’d want to have alongside meat,” Yumi remarked.

“I think I might like to have some every couple days or so. Their flavor is pretty different from any other dish I’ve tried, after all,” Telia Mas added.

Sugar and honey hadn’t even been available in the post town until a few months ago, and prior to that, they had only had a few kinds of sweet fruit to enjoy. That meant that sweet foods in general were still unfamiliar territory for them.

“Well, it might be interesting to try selling them sometime in the future. They apparently have an oversupply of gigi leaves in the castle town, and it’ll probably be hard to use them up without getting our stalls involved. Still, I’d like to focus on things we can eat here at the forest’s edge.” At that point, I turned toward Mia Lea Ruu to hear her opinion. “I know we discussed this before, but what about eating sweets during the day as a snack? Or would it be a problem that it won’t give you as much strength as jerky does?”

“Well, lately we’ve been eating baked poitan as well. Not just the women, but the men too. Many of the men even say they feel stronger when they also eat poitan.”

“Yeah, I usually eat the same amount of poitan as jerky. And I bet I’d get even stronger if you could throw some aria in there too,” Ludo Ruu chimed in from the entrance.

“In that case, how about having the women add a little sweet to the food they eat during the daytime as a snack? And maybe even pair it with tea too...” I suggested.

“Tea? I can’t speak to that, as I’ve never had any myself. But I’ve heard from Reina and the others that people drink it in the castle town and the Daleim lands,” Mia Lea Ruu said.

“They drink it in the post town too, at the inns. You can get drinkable water from wells in the post town, but everyone seems to prefer having tea instead. It’s tasty, and it’s nutritious too.” At that point, I took another item out of a cloth bag: a chatchi skin that I had dried out yesterday. “We’ve had chatchi skin tea before while we were visiting the Daleim lands. The topic of tea came up a bit in the castle town, so I asked about how to make it on the way back.”

It really wasn’t anything difficult. You just took a crispy, dried-out chatchi skin and crumbled it up. Then you added the skin to hot water, strained the liquid after a while, and drank it.

Even though chatchi were vegetables similar to potatoes, their skins were like something you’d see on a citrus fruit, so chatchi tea had a fruity aroma and a refreshing flavor.

“Now that I think about it, you have zozo here in your pantry, don’t you? I’m pretty sure it’s been in there for the last seven months since the first time you showed me your food stores.”

“Yes. It doesn’t go bad, so it’s been left untouched all this time. Reina and the others will sometimes take a bit of it to try using it in cooking, but it never seems to add anything, so they just put it back where they found it.”

“I also learned how to make zozo tea, so why don’t we have everyone give it a try too?”

Zozo was shaped like a snake wrapped up in a coil, and had a texture that called to mind a shed snakeskin or a beehive, but it was really dense on the inside. Overall, it was around the size of a rugby ball.

Though seven months or so had passed since I had first seen it here in this pantry, there was still around eighty percent of it left. It was true that it seemed to have been shaved down here and there, but it was incredibly bitter, so I had a hard time picturing a use for it outside of tea.

“Some houses apparently keep them around for a year or two. If you do that,

the bitterness strengthens, but so does the aroma. Of course, if it gets wet in the meantime, it'll end up rotting."

The tea-making process once again simply involved shaving some zozo off of the mass, boiling it, and straining it out. I didn't have any specialized netting for the last step, so instead I had to use a coarse cloth to finish up both the chatchi and zozo teas.

Compared to the citrus-like chatchi tea, the zozo tea had a strong smell like Chinese herbal medicine. But when I gave it a try, it was surprisingly mellow and not even all that bitter.

"Ah, this is good tea," Dora remarked, looking quite satisfied. "Granny Mishil shares her chatchi skins with us, you see, so we don't buy zozo all that often."

"We serve zozo tea in our shop. The fruit you have here is a good one. Asuta said you've had it for at least seven months. Do you think it could've been sitting for around a year, perhaps?" Telia Mas asked.

"That may be so," Mia Lea Ruu replied, breaking out in a smile. "We bought it so we could add it to our soup, but we only needed a little to get all the aroma we needed, so we were never able to use it up."

"Why did you buy zozo in the first place if you don't drink tea? And at this size, it must have been pretty pricey too," Dora questioned.

Mia Lea Ruu shrugged her sturdy shoulders. "I'm not quite sure. We just wanted to check what kind of flavor it had. Back then, we never had an opportunity to become friendly enough with any of the vegetable sellers to ask them about these things. And we didn't know anything about tea or the like."

"Ah, I suppose that's true. Up until half a year ago, the people of the forest's edge and us townsfolk didn't get along at all," Dora said, looking over at Ludo and Vina Ruu. "I can still remember that time when you two came to my shop with Asuta. I heard you talking about liking chatchi and hating pula and so on, which really surprised me. I figured you people of the forest's edge were just eating my vegetables without even thinking about how they tasted."

"Huh? Did we ever talk about stuff like that?" Ludo Ruu wondered.

"We did... That was when we came to town with Asuta, and he was trying to

decide what sort of dish he should serve at his stall.” Vina Ruu replied, narrowing her eyes nostalgically. That must have been back when I had asked them to accompany me to make purchases, as Ai Fa had been busy with her work as a hunter. Back then, seeing the two of them in town had been really surprising for Dora.

The atmosphere had grown somewhat solemn, but then Mia Lea Ruu cheerfully spoke up. “Still, this zozo tea is certainly bitter. It’s not that I wouldn’t drink it, but I would hardly say it’s better than water.”

“Really? But bitter tea draws out the flavor of sweets better. And it could change your impression of other foods as well,” Dora said.

“I think I like it quite a bit. I’m enjoying just having a hot drink, even without any meat or vegetables in it,” Granny Tito Min chimed in.

Hearing that, Mia Lea Ruu said, “I see,” with a nod. “Well, I’m just grateful that we’ve found a use for this zozo so we won’t just be letting it rot. We can decide whether it’s good or not by the time it runs out.”

“Yeah. And we do use a lot of chatchi. We have a noisy little kid in our family who starts fussing if there isn’t any chatchi for dinner, after all,” Granny Tito Min said.

“Hey, everybody likes chatchi, right?” Ludo Ruu grumbled, taking a sip of his chatchi tea. “And I like this stuff too. It’s even tastier than fruit wine.”

“I think I really like it too! And if I drink it with sweets, it’ll make them even tastier, right?” Rimee Ruu asked, looking like a puppy wagging its tail.

“That’s right,” I told her with a smile. “Why don’t we give it a try with dinner tonight? You’re going to make dessert for us again, right, Rimee Ruu?”

“Yeah! I promised Tara I would!”

Tara was smiling happily. In fact, almost everyone was smiling, except for a few people like Ai Fa and Mikel. Things had already been pretty friendly the last time our guests had come here, but a month had passed since then, and there seemed to be even less of a boundary between the townsfolk and the members of the Ruu clan now.

“Well then, let’s deal with the next ingredient. This keru root seems like it would go well with myamuu giba.”

With that, our first study session in a while continued as the sunset steadily approached here at the forest’s edge.

Pino and Shantu both ate the same things we did and stood in the same general space, but they treated the entrance to the kitchen as a boundary, always watching over our exchanges with a small gap between us.

4

It was the lower sixth hour, around sunset, and we were at the main Ruu house, surrounded by a mountain of food.

Naturally, the members of the Gamley Troupe had left before the sun set, and Lem Dom had also returned home to sleep. Still, the addition of Ai Fa, myself, and the six guests alone was enough to make sure the main hall of the Ruu house was packed.

“This is the first time we’ve invited townsfolk to dinner at the Ruu house. I am grateful to the mother forest that we have been able to forge so many new bonds, when in the past we would always avoid one another if we were unfortunate enough to cross paths,” Donda Ruu began in a serious tone. “Dora the vegetable seller and his daughter Tara from the Daleim lands, Telia Mas and Yumi from the post town, Mikel and his daughter Myme from the Turan lands... Those are the names of the guests invited this night to the Ruu house.”

Dora and the other were sitting in half-circle, and each gave a grateful bow.

“You’ve likely already heard most of our names, but I’ll go through again just to be clear. I am the Ruu clan head, Donda Ruu; beside me is our elder, Jiba Ruu; to my right are my eldest son, Jiza Ruu; my second son, Darmu Ruu; my youngest son, Ludo Ruu; my eldest daughter, Vina Ruu; and my second daughter, Reina Ruu. To my left are my wife, Mia Lea Ruu; my mother, Tito Min Ruu; my eldest son’s wife, Sati Lea Ruu; their son, Kota Ruu; my third daughter, Lala Ruu; and my youngest daughter, Rimee Ruu. And then we have our other guests: Ai Fa and Asuta from the Fa clan, Sufira Zaza of the Zaza clan, Toor Deen

of the Deen clan, and Yun Sudra of the Sudra clan.”

Including the toddler, Kota Ruu, that made for a great big crowd of twenty-four in total. And since I hadn’t seen the little tyke in some time, he had grown quite a bit since then. Before, he had spent most of his time sleeping in a woven basket, but now he was able to walk a little, and it was absolutely adorable.

Kota Ruu would be turning two during the brown month. His little face had shifted from androgynous to clearly masculine, and his blackish-brown hair had really grown out. It was even possible that he was larger than Aimu Fou at this point. And currently, Kota Ruu was seated atop Sati Lea Ruu’s lap, innocence shining in his black eyes.

“Well then, let us begin our meal... We offer our gratitude to Tito Min, Vina, Reina, and Rimee, who manned the flame and gave us our life for this night...”

The people of the forest’s edge repeated Donda Ruu’s words, while the guests each followed their own premeal customs.

The Ruu clan’s chefs had made tonight’s dinner. The stuff we had worked on during our study session wasn’t part of this meal, so I hadn’t participated in preparing it at all. The menu included myamuu giba with keru root; sirloin with tarapa sauce; aria, tino, and chan sauté; chatchi salad with aria and nenon; and tau bean soup with herb-rich meatballs.

Apparently, they had been planning to serve a different type of grilled meat as the main dish, but the flavor of the myamuu giba with keru root added to it had left such a deep impression on Reina Ruu that she had made a last-minute swap. As for the tau beans, they had been added to the soup after it had already finished cooking.

They were also serving zozo tea to everyone who didn’t drink alcohol. It was being served in wooden dishes, since they didn’t have any cups specifically for beverages. They would probably buy some if they started making a habit of drinking tea after this.

“This is all very good. Are the Ruu clan’s chefs just especially skilled, even compared to the rest of the forest’s edge?” Dora called out while chowing down on the sirloin sauté.

Reina Ruu offered him a reserved smile. “Our bond with the Fa clan is the oldest, and Asuta has been instructing us for the longest, so I should hope that would be the case.”

“It really is splendid. As a vegetable seller, I feel blessed to know that you’re making such delicious food with my crops.”

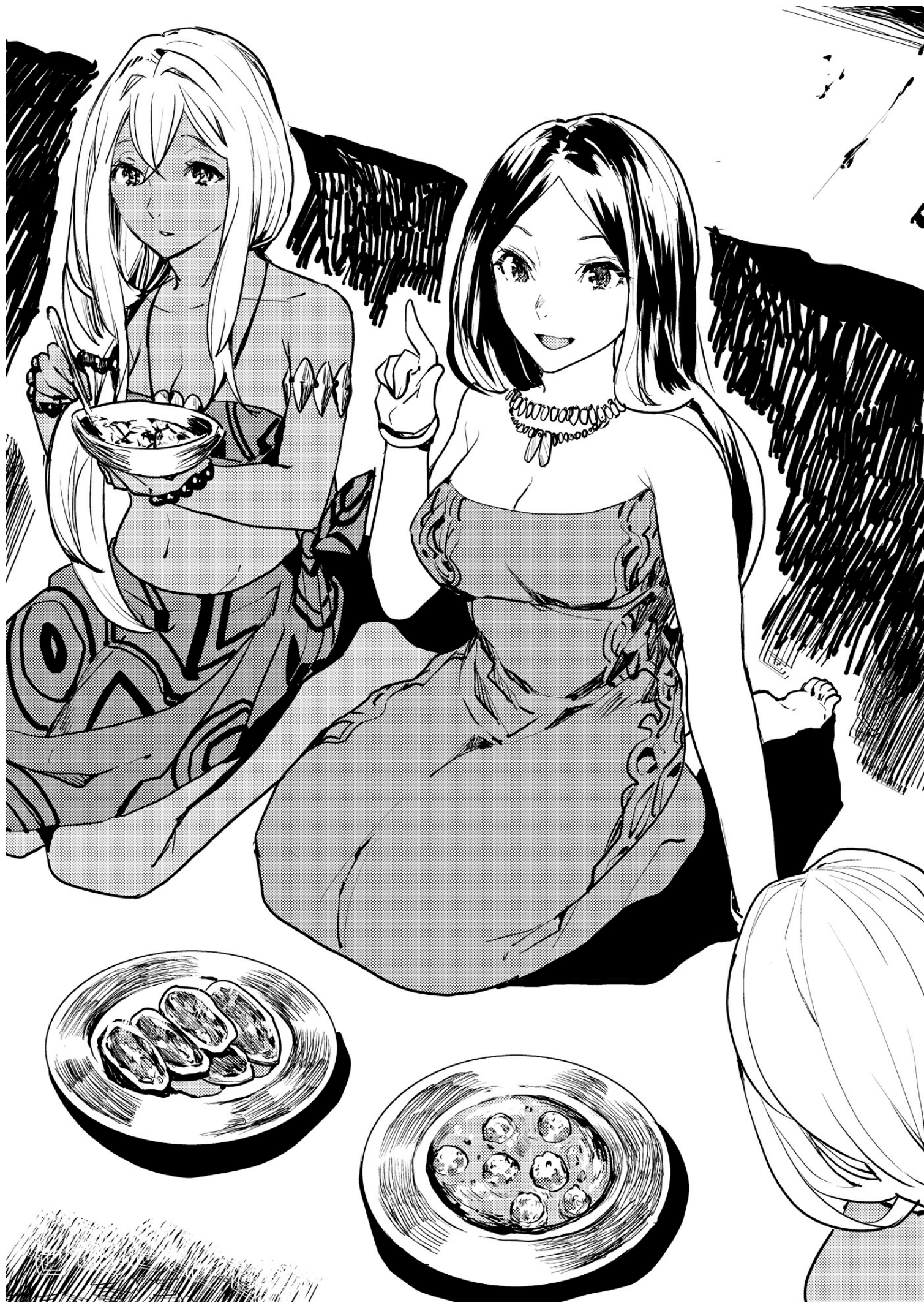
“That’s for sure. If you guys keep expanding your sales to the inns, we’ll never be able to compete,” Yumi chimed in.

“I’m sure that can’t be true. The Westerly Wind’s giba dishes are really popular, aren’t they?” I said back.

“Nah,” she said with a wide grin showing the whites of her teeth. “We don’t exactly use high-quality ingredients, and when I check out The Kimyuus’s Tail every now and then, I can’t help but think we could never beat them. You and Sheera Ruu have been alternating with Asuta to help them out, right, Reina Ruu?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“I can’t tell the difference at all! You sure are something else, Reina Ruu...”



Reina Ruu broke out in a somewhat embarrassed smile at that. Now that I thought about it, she had probably had the least amount of interaction with Yumi out of the four Ruu sisters.

Then, Yumi turned to look in the opposite direction. “By the way, that kid sure is one heck of an eater! His name was...Kota Ruu, right?”

“Yes. Jiza and I are his parents,” Sati Lea Ruu replied with a smile and a nod as Kota Ruu slurped soup down by her feet. The soup had meatballs in it, and the rest of his giba meat had been sliced up small so he wouldn’t have difficulty eating it.

“So cute! And he’s really got his mother’s eyes! Can I hold him again later?”

“Yes, of course.”

As far as I knew, this was their first meeting, but Sati Lea Ruu was polite and outgoing, and never hesitated to engage with our guests.

“Thank you so much for everything today... This old bag of bones has really been looking forward to it...” Granny Jiba said from the head of the group, where she had been enjoying her meal with Mia Lea Ruu’s assistance.

Dora then turned and smiled cheerfully at her. “We’re the ones who should be thanking all of you. Honestly, I wish I could have brought along the rest of my family. But I would feel bad about dumping such a huge crowd on you, so they’ll have to wait another three days until our next visit.”

“I would love to visit your home again, if it wouldn’t be any trouble for you...”

“It wouldn’t be any trouble at all! It only ever gets to be as lively as last time during the revival festival, but please feel free to stop by anytime.”

It seemed the members of the Ruu clan were now allowed to come visit Dora’s house whenever they pleased without needing to make a big deal out of it. I wondered to myself what the clan head and his heir thought of that, but they were both difficult to read—though not in the same way—so glancing over at them didn’t tell me anything.

“I’ve been looking forward to today as well. An old-timer like me can’t exactly go help out in the post town, so I’ve never had much of an opportunity to get to

know you all,” Granny Tito Min added, a joyful smile on her plump face. There really seemed to be a lot of friendly, broad-minded women in the main house. The older women in particular had much less interaction with the townsfolk, so they seemed particularly interested in talking with our guests. “And your name is Mikel, right? You’ve got a real glum look on your face. If there’s anything you’re not satisfied with, you need only say so.”

At that, Mikel sullenly looked up. “This is just how I am. Don’t mind me... I *am* impressed with how well all these dishes turned out.”

“It’s really delicious! The keru root seems to pair wonderfully with this dish!” Myme energetically added in place of her unsociable father. “I’ve heard that nobody from the forest’s edge had any interest in good food until Asuta came, so it’s really amazing that you were able to come far enough to make something this delicious in less than a year. There aren’t many places where you can find cooking this delicious in the Turan lands or the post town.”

“That’s true. I can’t believe you were just throwing zozo into soup a couple months ago,” Yumi agreed.

Even with so many ferocious-looking men from the Ruu clan gathered around them, Yumi and Myme didn’t seem to be intimidated in the least. And even though Telia Mas wasn’t saying much, she was continuing to eat with a gentle smile on her face.

As for Rimee Ruu and Tara, they had unsurprisingly secured seats next to one another and been happily chatting away. It had to be more than the fact that they were similar in age that led to them forming such an incredibly close friendship. Their cheery voices and laughter added a lot to the genial feeling in the air, even if they weren’t participating in the conversations around them.

“Oh yeah, an easterner by the name of Kukuluel stopped by the stalls today,” Ludo Ruu somewhat abruptly interjected. Our guests looked confused, as the men from the forest all suddenly became tense. “I’ll give a report before going to sleep. As far as I could tell, though, he seemed pretty trustworthy.”

“How long were you planning to stay silent about such an important matter?” Jiza Ruu calmly asked.

“When was I *supposed* to bring it up?” Ludo Ruu replied with a shrug. “I was

keeping an eye on those traveling performers the whole time after we returned to the settlement, and then when you guys came home from giba hunting, I had to escort them back to town, so there was no time to discuss it before now.”

“Who is that fellow with the strange name you mentioned? If you don’t mind telling us, of course,” Dora said, and Jiza Ruu silently looked at his father.

Donda Ruu also remained silent as he slurped down his highly aromatic soup, but Ludo Ruu said, “Why not?” as he picked at his chatchi salad. “Actually, I figure it’ll be good to hear Dora’s opinion, right? No matter what the nobles might say, people like him are the ones out there actually tilling the fields.”

“Hey, this is starting to sound kinda ominous. What’s all this about nobles and fields?” Dora asked, sounding worried, and Donda Ruu seemed to make up his mind.

With encouragement from Dora, Ludo Ruu went ahead and explained everything that Kukuluel had said about the plan to cut a path through the forest of Morga in order to secure a route to Sym.

“Goodness, that sounds utterly astounding! I’m amazed they could think up something like that. And they’re even planning to put the northerners to work on it,” Dora said, his voice a mix of admiration and astonishment. “Hmm...” he pondered, bringing his hands together. “Still, I’m not so sure... It’s true that for these past several months, things have been going fine, and we haven’t had giba rampaging over our fields. But if they cut down part of the forest and reduce the available food supply, it could end up breaking that peace, couldn’t it?”

“There’s no way to know for sure until the trees are actually felled. But the nobles are supposedly planning to build a fence around the Daleim lands too.”

“That’ll be a pretty major undertaking as well, considering how vast the Daleim lands are. It’ll also mean even more personnel and materials are going to be needed... Oh, could they be planning on using the wood cut down at the forest’s edge to build it?”

“I have no idea. We haven’t even fully agreed to go along with this yet.”

“I see,” Dora said, tapping his turban-wrapped head with a finger a few times.

Then his gaze shifted from Ludo Ruu to me. “Well, it’s not like we have the power to change anything the nobles decide on. By the way, has the head of the house of Daleim given his approval for this?”

“I’d imagine they’ve probably run it by him, but I don’t know whether he’s agreed to it or not,” I said.

When the Black Flight Feathers had come up during our study session in the castle town, I had noticed Polarth acting a little strangely. Melfried must have already spoken with him and the other nobles about this at that point.

“Well, I guess I can put my trust in the lord of the lands where I live. Or at least, in the lord’s second son, who I know pays attention to the needs of the people of Daleim, and of the forest’s edge.”

“Hmm. I’m more worried about them letting northerners loose in the forest than I am about that stuff about clearing a path. I don’t really know the details, but they seriously hate westerners, don’t they?” Yumi asked.

“Huh?” Ludo Ruu tilted his head. “You don’t really know, but you’re still worried? I actually saw a woman from Mahyudra in the castle town, and she was just as much of a looker as you are, Yumi.”

“That has nothing to do with it! But, huh... So they have slaves from Mahyudra working in the castle town, and not just in the Turan lands?”

I was the one who provided the answer to her question. “No, it seems the previous head of the house of Turan was the only person in Genos who used northerners as slaves. The woman Ludo Ruu mentioned was a servant at the Turan manor.”

None of us were very knowledgeable about the people of Mahyudra, so it seemed like the topic would be dropped there. But then, having only half-listened to our serious conversation, Tara suddenly said, “Maybe it would be good if Mr. Kamyua was here, then. Isn’t he from the north?”

Looking as if he had suddenly been hit unexpectedly, Jiza Ruu replied, “Indeed. That man may well be the best equipped to accurately assess whether this course of action is appropriate or not. And he would be able to express his opinion directly to the lord of Genos himself.”

“Yup, you’ve got it... Oh, sorry! I mean, I agree.”

“Young children such as yourself have no need to watch the way they speak...” Jiza Ruu calmly stated, and his wife let a little giggle escape her a short distance away from him.

“You’ve exchanged words with a man from Mahyudra before, haven’t you, Asuta of the Fa clan?” Donda Ruu called out.

“I have,” I replied with a nod. “He was the older brother of the woman who works in the castle town. His name is Eleo Chel, and he wanted to know how his younger sister, Chiffon Chel, was doing. I told him, and he thanked me.”

“He must possess a strong, faithful heart to reach out to you like that, despite being a slave...” Donda Ruu said. “To be frank, I can’t help but wonder if the way the nobles of Genos are using these people as tools should be considered a sin... However, I have heard that citizens of the west are treated as slaves in Mahyudra as well.”

“Yes, Kamyua did tell us that.”

It seemed that the girls who had been kidnapped from town by the Suun clan in the past had somehow been taken to Mahyudra to be sold. However, I didn’t want to darken the mood any further, so I refrained from bringing that up.

“We people of the forest’s edge have paid no attention to matters outside of the forest until recently, which has left us unqualified to speak about issues like slavery. That being the case, we have no choice but to continue our discussions with the nobles of Genos if we are to determine the proper path forward.”

Donda Ruu was probably thinking the same thing as me. His tone made it clear that there wouldn’t be any more discussion on the matter, so we dragged the topic back toward something more general and spent the rest of the meal conversing with our precious guests.

Yun Sudra had stiffened up a good bit due to being at the main house of her parent clan, but as time passed, her cheerful nature started shining through, and she began talking to the guests and members of the Ruu clan more openly. Our guests from town were quite interested in the customs of the forest’s edge, so the conversation never ceased, and we ended up having a really enjoyable

dinner together.

Questions about cooking were also directed at Mikel, while Telia Mas's opinions regarding the state of the post town were also asked about. Mia Lea Ruu and Granny Tito Min from the forest's edge were good at facilitating conversations, and the same was true of Yumi and Dora among the guests, so they were even able to get the really untalkative folks in the room to join in. Out of everyone, only Darmu Ruu seemed a little annoyed with how things were going.

"You're awfully quiet over there. And you've been frowning this whole time, even with all the delicious food to eat," Yumi remarked, but Darmu Ruu just deeply furrowed his brow in response. "It's such a shame. You're a really handsome guy, you know. Girls would be all over you if you would just smile at them."

"And this is relevant to you in some way?"

"It isn't, no. But Ludo and Lala Ruu have been worried about you. I mean, their big brother hasn't taken a bride, and he's almost twenty."

"What have you been telling these townsfolk?!" Darmu Ruu shouted, his scarred right cheek now bright red, only for Donda Ruu to quickly silence him.

"Quiet, you. We're in the middle of dinner, and you will *not* raise your voice like that. Besides, Ludo and Lala are right. Just when are you planning on getting married, anyway?"

I felt bad for Darmu Ruu, but the exchange was adding even more color to the proceedings.

From there the food steadily vanished, and when the plates were mostly empty, Rimee Ruu rose decisively to her feet.

"Okay, it's about time for dessert! Tara, could you help me out?"

"Yeah!"

A huge wooden pot-like container had been set down beside the entrance, and the two young girls went and carried it into the middle of the main hall. Meanwhile, Reina Ruu served fresh zozo tea that had been kept warm on a

small stove meant for that purpose.

“Today, I made a new kind of chatchi mochi! They’re really tasty, so everyone give them a try!”

The fresh plate full of chatchi mochi was then passed all around.

The sweets themselves had a bit of a light cocoa-like coloring, and a faint brown sauce had been poured over them. Rimee Ruu had gotten really bold this time, employing two new ingredients at once: gigi leaves and hoboi seeds.

The jiggly translucent chatchi mochi had been made by kneading gigi leaves, karon milk, and sugar into them, and the brown sauce was caramelized sugar with ground hoboi seeds. She had combined the tastes of the cacao-like gigi leaves and the sesame-seed-like hoboi seeds. It was a pretty adventurous experiment, but Rimee Ruu’s instincts when it came to making confections were second only to Toor Deen’s, so it had turned out quite well.

While the sauce was highly sweet, the mochi was more restrained in that way. The gigi and milk gave the dish plenty of flavor, and it had a really pleasant texture. It had ended up as something like warabi mochi with a cocoa-like flavor and a sweet honey-like sauce with the aroma of sesame seeds added on top. I thought it would probably synergize quite well with the zozo tea.

“Ah, delicious...” Granny Jiba remarked with a wrinkled smile. Rimee Ruu had put a lot more effort into creating her chatchi mochi than she had for her other desserts out of consideration for Granny Jiba, who had weak teeth. And of course, nobody had any complaints about the flavor.

“It is indeed. So much so that it feels like a shame to finish eating it,” Sufira Zaza said, seemingly without thinking, only to quickly school her expression a moment later, but she failed to escape the sharp-eyed Rimee Ruu’s notice.

“Thanks! I’m glad that you always seem to enjoy our desserts, Sufira Zaza!”

Sufira Zaza’s cheeks turned red, and she offered no response. I thought it was a pretty adorable contrast with how strict she usually acted.

Since the Ruu clan head and second son were still banned from drinking fruit wine, they were chowing down on their chatchi mochi with as much enthusiasm as they’d had while eating dinner.

“Yeah, it’s really good. I know I was saying that sweets probably wouldn’t do well if you tried to sell them at a stall, but with something this tasty, it might just work,” Yumi said.

She and Telia Mas were also smiling and enjoying their chatchi mochi. They had refrained from joining in on our taste testing earlier, since they had wanted to wait until it was officially unveiled here.

“This is wonderful. I’d like to try making it too... But I wonder if it’s too soon for me to start working with sweets?” Myme stealthily asked, only to be met with a glare from her blunt father.

“If you think you can learn to make sweets while also figuring out how to handle meat, vegetables, and seasonings, then do as you please. But don’t come crying to me.”

“Jeez! If it’s not okay, then just tell me so! You don’t have to say it in such a mean way!”

As I listened to that exchange between father and daughter, I stole a glance at Ai Fa next to me. Her expression remained as calm as always as she brought her chatchi mochi to her mouth.

“All the food has been good, hasn’t it?”

“Indeed.”

“I’m really looking forward to the banquet in three days. It’s not bad, being treated entirely as a guest, actually.”

“But the day before that, we must head to the castle town again. Hopefully, we will be able to say that trip was enjoyable as well.”

Now that she mentioned it, the peace banquet with the house of Saturas would indeed be happening two days from now. Though we hadn’t explicitly been invited by name, we would be attending in order to help build a stronger relationship with the house of Saturas, which ruled over the post town.

“Well, the house of Genos will be managing the event, so I don’t think there’s anything to be all that worried about. I couldn’t even begin to guess what sort of food they’ll be feeding us, though.”

Apparently, Varkas wouldn't be in charge of the kitchen on that day, since he would be dealing with a request from a different noble. As such, the person currently under consideration to fill that role was the head chef of the house of Saturas.

"Even if it were Varkas handling it, the food they serve could never be as enjoyable as tonight's. I can't even imagine ever being as happy in the castle town as we are here at the settlement at the forest's edge right now, eating a meal prepared by our comrades."

"Yeah, I agree."

That was how incredibly heartwarming and just plain fun the meal we had enjoyed tonight was. Would the day come when we would be able to share this joy with the nobles as well? I had no way of knowing, but it was an unshakable fact that I felt truly blessed in this moment.

Chapter 3: The Peace Banquet

1

It was currently half past the lower fourth hour on the ninth of the silver month. We had finished our preparations for business the next day, and Ai Fa, Toor Deen, and I were heading to the Ruu settlement. It was time for us to go to the Saturas manor in the castle town with the members of the Ruu clan.

There had been two incidents that had soured the relationship between the people of the forest's edge and the house of Saturas. One of them was the underhanded ploy Geimalos had tried against Shin Ruu in that swordsmanship contest held in the post town. The other was back in the gray month of last year when Leeheim had tried to give Reina Ruu an expensive gift while visiting our stalls in the post town and she had shot him down pretty firmly.

Compared to the former, the latter was a relatively unimportant matter that hadn't ended up going anywhere, and for that reason, it had never turned into a major topic for gossip. Had Reina Ruu simply been a girl from town, Leeheim might well have taken more forceful measures in response and caused the situation to get a whole lot worse. Fortunately, the nobles of Genos had been making an effort to reconcile with the people of the forest's edge then as now, so without us even having to do anything, Duke Marstein Genos had intervened on his own to prevent things from worsening, and had swiftly brought the quarrel to an end.

However, at the time, Leeheim had been fascinated not only by Reina Ruu, but by giba cooking and the meat itself. It was possible that his interest in our cooking had just been a front to give him an excuse to come all the way out to the post town where he could meet with Reina Ruu, but behind the scenes he had supposedly been planning to buy up all of the giba meat that we'd had available as well.

Back then, giba meat had still been priced the same as karon leg meat. That

meant it had only cost only about half as much as the karon torso meat that was so popular in the castle town, despite the fact that giba tasted just as amazing as karon torso did. As such, Leeheim had planned to purchase a massive amount of giba meat so that he could sell it in the castle town.

That said, his motivation had not been to simply take all the profits to be had from the meat for himself. It was more that he had simply seen the benefit in getting delicious meat for cheap. Plus, he had supposedly figured that if he could bring a ton of business to the people of the forest's edge, he would earn our gratitude and improve his relationship with Reina Ruu.

Unfortunately for him, the people of the forest's edge had not welcomed the favor he was trying to do us. If a noble monopolized giba meat, it would mean we couldn't continue with our business in the post town, and the bonds we had worked so hard to develop with the townsfolk would be severed in an awful manner. It also would have generated a lot of completely needless animosity from the other nobles to boot. And so, Marstein had promptly intervened in that matter as well.

That was one of the reasons the price of giba meat had ended up getting raised to one-and-a-half times what it had been, and people in the post town had started treating it as a more expensive commodity than karon leg meat. As a result, we and the inn owners had needed to rack our brains in order to figure out how to prevent sales from falling off. The desperate measure we had come up with in the aftermath was to reduce the sizes of the meals we offered to keep costs down.

However, the end result had been superb for us. I had received the request to help use up the castle town's excess ingredients in the post town around then, so I had come up with a new menu that fortunately seized the interest of the townsfolk. It had allowed us to expand our business even further, so I couldn't have asked for a better outcome.

However, from Leeheim's perspective, the matter was still unresolved. In all likelihood, he felt as if his goodwill had been thrown right back in his face. From his point of view, both the thing with Reina Ruu and his plans for the giba meat had been founded on good intentions and affection. But he had approached both his objectives like a noble, so his efforts had turned out to be unacceptable

to us.

That was how he had ended up feeling animosity toward the people of the forest's edge. He had spoken poorly of my cooking during the banquet held at the castle town, and he had also invited Shin Ruu to the castle town as a form of harassment. In all likelihood, he hadn't realized just how strong the hunters of the forest's edge really were and had intended to have one beaten down by Geimalos and shamed for all to see.

However, Geimalos had had a more accurate grasp of the situation. He was famed for his swordsmanship in the castle town, but he never could have measured up to a hunter from the forest's edge in a fair fight. And so, fearing being shamed himself, he had arranged for Shin Ruu to wear heavy cavalry armor during the contest as an underhanded trick.

So, put simply, that incident had also been triggered by Leeheim's ill intent. He had been told to keep himself in check in regards to Reina Ruu and giba meat, but the thing with Geimalos had turned into a serious incident that threatened to fracture the trust between the people of the forest's edge and the nobles of Genos. It had forced Marstein to set up this peace banquet in order to put the dispute between Leeheim and the people of the forest's edge to rest.

"And to top it all off, the house of Saturas is in charge of managing the post town, so we can't just write this off as someone else's problem, with all the business we do there. That's why I'd like to do whatever I can to help the Ruu clan fix things with Leeheim," I explained as I handled Gilulu's reins.

Ai Fa replied with a simple "Indeed," in her usual tone from her spot behind the driver's seat where she was relaxing. She had been working hard, training her body all day once again, and now she was resting up. "Still, there is one thing I do not understand. What exactly does the house of Saturas do to govern the post town? Despite how long you've been working there, their name has hardly ever come up."

"I'm not sure. Now that you mention it, I don't even know what Marstein does to manage the castle town either. I assume the nobles keep an eye on things to make sure the townsfolk can live in peace, and they collect taxes as

payment.”

“Hmm... So when the lord of a domain falls to depravity as Cyclaeus did, the people living there suffer hardships.”

“Yup, that’s right. Now, judging from what Milano Mas and Yumi have told me, it sounds like the people of the post town don’t exactly revere the house of Saturas, but there aren’t really any substantial nasty rumors about them either. Not that the townsfolk have much of a chance to find out about that stuff, with the way the nobles keep to themselves in the castle town.”

That didn’t just go for the house of Saturas. We still didn’t even know the name of the head of the house of Daleim. While Polarth frequently showed himself to us, that really wasn’t the standard for the nobles of Genos.

“I wonder what kind of person the head of the house of Saturas—Leeheim’s father—is. I just hope he’s not too narrow-minded,” I said as the Ruu settlement came into view. Since we were going to be departing again soon, we parked our wagon at the entrance to the settlement, and then I got down from the driver’s seat.

However, Ai Fa suddenly called out, “Hold on. Don’t go off on your own. And Toor Deen, you should stick with us too.”

“Right,” Toor Deen replied, getting down along with Ai Fa. My clan head must have been wary of the members of the Gamley Troupe who had been staying here at the Ruu settlement since yesterday.

The Ruu clan hunters and Pino’s group would still be out in the forest at this time of day. However, the troupe’s massive carriages were parked in front of the settlement, and we could hear the beautiful sound of a flute as we headed inside.

Right after we stepped into the plaza, we encountered a woman seated atop a pile of lumber playing said instrument. It was Nachara, the bewitching beauty with slightly dark skin, gorgeously dressed in a long outfit with Sym-style embroidery. Beside her, the strongman, Doga, and the little guy, Zan, were chopping firewood.

I gave them a slight bow, but only Doga nodded back. He was so big that even

Ji Maam couldn't compare, and his hair had been shaved off. His face was really rugged and reminded me of a Moai statue, but he had a gentle personality and both spoke and acted very politely.

On the other hand, we had Zan, a small man who hid his face behind a leather mask. He was only around 150 centimeters tall, but his arms and shoulders were muscular like a gorilla's, and he was an expert when it came to knife throwing. He didn't seem to be a bad guy or anything, but I had never heard him talk even once.

All around them, women and children without any work to do at the moment were gathered a short distance away, watching them. Even if this was their second day at the settlement, the people who lived here were definitely not used to their presence yet. Still, Nachara's flute playing had a real nostalgic feel to it and was definitely worth listening to.

"Ai Fa, Asuta. You're heading to the castle town soon, right? Keep up the good work," Shin Ruu's father and the former head of his house, Ryada Ruu, called out as he approached us, dragging his right leg along.

"Hello there, Ryada Ruu. So, you're having them help out with cutting firewood?"

"Yes. They asked us for some work to do. Said their bodies would grow weak if they spent all day in their wagons. Donda Ruu accepted their offer."

Ryada Ruu had been assigned to be their supervisor. That was no surprise, though, as there weren't many men left in the settlement when the hunters went out into the forest.

"So, it's already the second day now. Do you think they'll be able to capture a live giba?"

"I'm not sure. We found a number of giba caught in our traps yesterday, but none that met their needs, it would seem... They're after a very young giba."

"Yeah, I imagine it just wouldn't be possible to teach a full-grown giba to do tricks. But the young ones are under their mothers' protection, so it's pretty rare to catch any, right?"

"Indeed. It would be best for everyone if they would give up soon."

As we were talking, a wagon pulled by Ruuruu approached us from the main house. Reina Ruu was the one holding the reins.

“We’ve been waiting for you, Asuta. We’re all ready to go, so why don’t we just head out now?”

Ludo Ruu was smiling and waving at us behind Reina Ruu. He must have wrapped up his hunting work early so he could come along with us as a guard.

Our only role today was to be the nobles’ guests, so the Ruu clan had picked a small but elite group to go. Jiza Ruu was attending on behalf of the injured clan head, while Reina and Shin Ruu had to come because they were the ones the house of Saturas had actually wronged, and Sheera Ruu was going to help prepare the meal. Ludo Ruu was our one and only guard.

There was a reason our guard was so light this time. At this banquet, the guests would be permitted to bring their swords along. As Jiza and Shin Ruu were both hunters with plenty of experience, they would be perfectly capable of protecting the women themselves. With Ai Fa attending as well, Donda Ruu had decided that sending Ludo Ruu to guard us would be plenty.

Officially, Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu were both guests as well, so we would all be sitting together around a dinner table prepared by the house of Saturas today. As such, Donda Ruu had told us to keep our numbers as low as possible, which was why we only had Toor Deen accompanying us.

There were two reasons for having her come along. One was that I wanted her to have as many chances as possible to taste the cuisine of the castle town. The other was that Melfried would be bringing his wife and daughter. We were going to provide two dishes today as a show of friendship, and since Odifia had been wanting to see Toor Deen again so badly, I figured this would help satisfy the young noble girl.

With the addition of Sufira Zaza, who would be acting as an observer, we had a total of nine people in our group. I got the feeling that bringing this many of us to a private peace banquet might be a bit much, but the house of Saturas hadn’t taken any issue with it.

“I guess this should be about the right time. Okay, see you tomorrow, Ryada Ruu.”

“Indeed. I’m sure there won’t be any danger, but take care not to let your guards down.”

Tomorrow, we would finally have our welcome banquet. Sure, we had just had a big celebration ten days ago on the day of the downfall, but opportunities like this didn’t come up very often, so that made no difference. And while Yumi and Telia Mas could visit whenever, Dora would have trouble pulling himself away from work at any other time of year. Considering how busy they all were during the revival festival, I liked the idea of giving them another chance to enjoy themselves.

That was what I was thinking about as we exited the settlement, but just as we were about to get into our wagon, we heard the sound of another wagon approaching from down the road to the south. It was a huge box carriage, coming from the direction of the post town. There were red designs like flames painted on its sides, so it must have belonged to the Gamley Troupe. They had seven wagons, and apparently one of them had gone to town earlier. It was being pulled by a pair of tolos rather than the desert lizards from the south, and one of the twins, Arun or Amin, was holding the reins.

Because their carriages were so big, it was hard to pass by one on the path through the forest’s edge, so we had to wait for them to stop off to the side of the road.

When they came to a stop and we saw who stepped out of the carriage, Ai Fa’s eyes instantly narrowed. It was Neeya, who we hadn’t seen in quite a while.

“Oh my! It has truly been some time, O beautiful lady,” Neeya remarked, hurrying over with a flat cap on his head and his guitar-like instrument on his back. When she saw his carefree smile, Ai Fa narrowed her eyes even more harshly.

“Stop right there. Don’t come any closer. I have no intention of listening to anything you say.”

“Oh? What cold words, when we have only just reunited after so long. Whatever did I do to anger you so, dear lady?”

“You’re asking why I’m angry...? Do you not remember what you did?”

“Hmm? I already gave you a heartfelt apology for acting rudely toward your clan member,” Neeya replied with a blank look. Even I was surprised by his behavior now.

We hadn’t had a proper face-to-face encounter with Neeya since the day of the sun’s peak. That evening, he had sung the song of Misha the White Sage for us with an empty smile. He had seemed like a completely different person then, almost as if he had been in a trance... But today, he was back to how he used to be, grinning at us empty-headedly.

“Pino has been terribly obnoxious toward me as of late, so I haven’t had the opportunity to come meet you. Of course, I’ve also been quite busy lately. In fact, I am just coming back from spending some sweet time together with the noblewomen of the castle town.”

“Irrelevant. You...” Ai Fa started to say something, stepping forward, but I hurriedly held her back.

“Don’t, Ai Fa. I don’t think he means any harm,” I whispered to her, only for Ai Fa to shoot me a glare with her still-narrowed eyes. Neeya must have had some serious nerve if a glower that intense didn’t affect him. “I can’t really explain it properly, but that Neeya guy... The way he looks at the world is probably completely different from how we do.”

“I don’t understand what you mean. And regardless, I think he might be the most irritating person I have ever met.”

“Yeah. It’s probably best that you don’t have much to do with him. I’m sure you and Jiza Ruu are even less compatible with him than I am.”

I didn’t think I could fully explain it in words, but that really was how I felt. Neeya undoubtedly had an entirely different set of sensibilities than either the townsfolk or the nobles. Maybe you could say that he had an artist’s disposition, or that he didn’t give a damn about the obligations of normal life.

Gamley was kind of similar, but even he seemed to be aware of the impact his words had on others. I couldn’t help but think that Neeya was utterly lacking in such awareness.

And yet, Neeya was an excellent singer. He fit my image of a genius musician

lacking in social graces perfectly. And if my interpretation was correct, it was only natural that he would be a dizzyingly bad match for the simple and earnest hunters of the forest's edge.

Now that I think about it, Varkas might be the same. Maybe that was why Ai Fa had trouble dealing with him as well.

The biggest difference between Varkas and Neeya was what they thought about me. Varkas was very fond of me—so much so that it seemed a little obsessive—while Neeya was not. If anything, he seemed to dislike me because of how close I was to Ai Fa. I really couldn't see anything good coming from him and my clan head continuing to interact.

"We need to be heading over to the castle town ourselves now, so please excuse us," I said.

Neeya seemed like he had more he wanted to say, but then he just shrugged in an affected way. He looked a lot like Gamley when he did that.

"Well then, I shall see you later, dear lovely lady. I would like to present at least one more song to you before leaving Genos."

"I absolutely refuse," Ai Fa said in a tone as forceful as a physical blow as she got into the wagon.

Neeya let out a "Tch!" as I watched him from the corner of my eye.

And with that, we were finally able to start our journey to the castle town.

2

A little over half an hour later, we arrived at the Saturas manor.

It was a large building that stretched out horizontally in front of us, though still somewhat smaller than the former Turan manor. There was a sprawling garden in front of the manor and a path paved with gray stone stretching from the gate to the entrance. Maybe that was just standard for the manors of nobles in Genos.

"We've been waiting for you. Please, come this way."

A young page and a middle-aged officer in an unfamiliar uniform welcomed us into the manor. The hallway inside was lined with thick carpeting, and there were framed paintings here and there along the walls. It seemed they had put more effort into the decorations here than the Turans had at their manor, giving the place an elegant feel.

As expected, we found ourselves invited to use their bathhouse first. The antechamber was impressively spacious, and there were a surprising number of servants awaiting us there. Eight in total, both young and old, men and women. They were all clad in milky-white flowing robes, and held their hands together in front of their stomachs as they stood in a line.

“You may enjoy the bath in groups of up to ten. Please feel free to select whichever attendants you wish to assist you.”

“You mean to help wash us? In that case, we won’t be needing any,” I replied in Jiza Ruu’s place, as he had only used a noble bathhouse once before.

The page who led us here looked a bit troubled. “It is customary here at this house to demonstrate our hospitality in this way. Please don’t hesitate to pick out a servant to assist you, dear guests.”

I had a feeling that if we refused to take any of them along, they would be scolded by their master. Figuring there was no helping it, the men in our group simply picked the youngest boy among the pages and then we headed in to bathe. So, it was me, Jiza Ruu, Shin Ruu, and Ludo Ruu going in together. We started removing our clothes, with the page silently accepting them from us with his eyes staring down at the ground.

“Hey, I can’t imagine this would be the case, but can male guests ask to have a woman assist them?” Ludo Ruu asked while throwing off his clothing.

“Yes,” the boy succinctly replied.

“Then what about female guests choosing to have a man help them? There’s no way that would be allowed, right?”

“No.”

“Which part are you saying no to? Are you saying women can expose themselves to men?”

“Yes.”

Ludo Ruu rustled his yellowish-brown hair while Jiza Ruu and I shared a look.

“Hey, are we really going to be okay here?” the young hunter asked.

“No matter what customs the nobles may have, we simply need to follow our own,” Jiza Ruu said.

“That’s for sure. There’s no way our women would ever expose themselves to a man who isn’t family, right, Asuta?”

“Y-Yeah, that’s right.”

Once, a long time ago, Ludo Ruu had tricked me into going to their bathing area while the women had been using it. Jiza Ruu had come down hard on both of us, but Ludo Ruu seemed completely nonchalant about it now, as if he had completely forgotten that it had ever happened.

Also, I hadn’t told anyone about this yet, but the first time I had been taken to one of these bathhouses, I had been accompanied by Chiffon Chel, a member of the opposite sex. Maybe that was just one of the standard ways nobles showed hospitality to their guests.

It does seem fitting, when you look at how they tend to think, but it’s obvious that the people of the forest’s edge wouldn’t see things the same way.

We then opened the door to the next room and stepped into the steamy bathhouse. There was a mugwort-like scent in the air, just like there had been at the Turan manor and the palace from the tea party, with a sweet, flowery aroma mixed in. There were also bathtubs filled with water along the opposite wall from us.

“What’s this? We’re supposed to cleanse ourselves in here?” Ludo Ruu asked.

“Yes. We have prepared both cool and hot water, so feel free to use whichever you please.”

The page boy stripped off his robe, leaving him standing there in a simple loincloth. He was a pale, slender lad, and it felt odd to think that part of his job was to assist bathing noblewomen.

At any rate, Ludo Ruu was really happy to see that they had proper baths

here. The people of the forest's edge were far more familiar with the idea of dumping water over themselves to get clean than they were with steaming themselves and wiping off grime. And in an area with weather as temperate as Genos's, bathing in cool water felt quite pleasant.

The tubs were built into the room so that their bottoms were lower than the floor, with stone stairs you could step down to submerge yourself. They were deep enough that the water—which had red and pink flower petals floating on its surface—would come up to your chest if you sat down in them.

Ludo and Shin Ruu immediately went and got in one of the tubs together, while Jiza Ruu started cleaning his body with one of those spatula-like wooden scrubbers. As nobody had called for him, the page boy just stood in the corner of the room, and I decided to step into the second bath by myself while also watching everyone out of the corner of my eye.

The water was just a bit warmer than skin temperature. Did that mean they had a fire going to keep it that way? The bath was large enough to fit five people at once, so it must have required quite a bit of fuel to heat.

Still, this was my first warm bath in seven months. I would have preferred it to be a bit hotter, but it felt quite pleasant in an entirely different way than soaking in cool water. Finally, I had found something I could feel grateful for in the extravagant lifestyles enjoyed by the nobles.

“Why’re you getting in the warm water? It’s just gonna make you sweat, right?” Ludo Ruu asked while splashing water at Shin Ruu.

“That doesn’t matter since you can just wash it off again anyway. Back in my home country, hot baths were the norm.”

“Huh,” Ludo Ruu pondered, tilting his head, before he went ahead and crossed over into the bath I was using. But less than ten seconds later, he muttered, “Yeah, this just isn’t working,” and retreated. “It makes my back or rear or whatever feel all itchy. I’m amazed you can stand it, Asuta.”

“It just feels pleasant to me. But I guess it is pretty much the opposite of bathing in cool water.”

And so, we thoroughly enjoyed the hospitality of the bathhouse without

needing to trouble the young page. Then we put our clothing back on and returned to the antechamber, where I was met with a glare from Ai Fa and a remark of, “You certainly took your time.”

The women unsurprisingly selected the youngest maid before they disappeared into the bathhouse. They obviously weren’t going to choose a member of the opposite sex, and they likely felt awkward about having an older woman accompany them. They then spent around the same amount of time in the bathhouse as we did, meaning it took around thirty to forty minutes for all of us to finish up there.

“You certainly took your time,” I teased against my better judgment when they returned, and sure enough, that earned me a kick to the leg. Ai Fa was very fond of bathing, which was probably why they had spent so long in there.

At any rate, it would soon be the lower sixth hour. Having finished cleansing ourselves, we were finally invited to the banquet hall.

We were led up a wide staircase to the second floor. On the way there, I spied paintings, statues, and flowers arranged in vases, but the banquet hall proved to be even more extravagant.

It was a rather wide, oblong room. There were candlesticks placed here and there along the wall and a familiar sort of chandelier hung overhead, illuminating the hall. A rug with beautiful geometric patterns stretched out across the floor, while there were foreign-looking tapestries on the walls, and mysterious statues in the four corners of the room. It looked similar to the dining room from the Turan manor, but everything was even more elaborate and refined, just like you’d expect of a noble manor.

The house of Turan had undoubtedly been more wealthy, at least in the past. However, the Saturas manor felt more ornate. More effort had been put into adorning the room, and its aesthetics were evidence of a much greater degree of thought and care. As lavish as the place was, it didn’t feel ostentatious or gaudy at all. Even for someone like me who had no idea what any of the decorations represented, it felt quite pleasant and maybe even a little stylish.

“Welcome, dear guests from the forest’s edge. Please, have a seat.”

The attendees from the nobility had already gathered. Melfried and Polarth

were here as witnesses, and the former had brought his wife, Eulifia, and daughter, Odifia. Aside from Leeheim, they were the only familiar faces.

There were fewer people from the house of Saturas present than I had expected. The one who had called out to us from the head of the table must have been Count Saturas himself. His oily hair had been combed down just like Leeheim's, he had an over-the-top mustache, and he looked to be around forty. His medium-sized frame was clad in a long, loose robe, and a single piece of silver jewelry was hanging around his neck.

There was an unfamiliar youth sitting beside Leeheim who looked even younger than the noble heir. Probably around my age. While he wasn't wearing any armor, the white dress suit he had on made him look like some kind of officer. He was staring at us with an intense gaze.

Just like the head of the house and Leeheim, his hair and eyes were both brown, he had tanned skin, and his face was deadly serious. Though their hair and skin colors differed, he kinda reminded me of Welhide from Banarm.

"I am the head of the house of Saturas, Luidross, and this is Leiriss of the knights of Saturas... He is the son of my foolish younger brother, Geimalos, who caused you fine people from the forest's edge such trouble. Geimalos is still not in any state to attend such an event, so please allow us to offer our apologies on behalf of our family member."

His speech flowed without the slightest hesitation. It seemed really fitting that the master of this elegant and refined manor would be a man like this. Out of all the nobles I had met, he was probably the one who best matched the image that term evoked.

Jiza Ruu then introduced everyone from the forest's edge. After that, the hunters handed their cloaks to the pages, and we all sat down grouped by clan in the order of Ruu, Fa, Deen, and Zaza. From Luidross's spot at the head of the table, the nobles were sitting on his right and the people of the forest's edge on his left.

"Oh, and we made sure to provide knight's chairs for all of you. If you wouldn't mind, please holster your blades in the scabbards along their backs."

Looking closely, I saw that there were tubes attached to the left side of the

chair backs. Both the chairs themselves and the tubes were made of wood and had been delicately engraved. The hunters silently removed their blades from their sheaths and placed them in the receptacles. It did seem to be a good setup for enjoying a meal while keeping a blade close at hand.

“Geimalos has caused you quite a bit of trouble, and with Duke Genos having directed us to mend our bridges with the people of the forest’s edge, it is all the more deplorable. As the head of the house of Saturas, allow me to offer you my most heartfelt apologies.”

If I had to say, I would have pegged Luidross as being a similar sort to Marstein. He was very polite and easygoing, but it was difficult to tell what he was really thinking. But he didn’t seem to have Marstein’s arrogance, for one thing. Instead, he felt more like an elegant and stylish middle-aged man who was still young in spirit.

“And you are Shin Ruu, correct? I hear that you are uninjured, but you truly have no complaints to offer?”

Shin Ruu just gave the count a silent little bow, clenching his jaw a bit. He must have found it difficult to know how to address a count. The people of the forest’s edge—and their hunters in particular—really didn’t make a habit of adjusting their speech based on who they were addressing.

“Still, to think that you defeated Geimalos with a single blow while wearing heavy cavalry armor... That armor is meant to be worn by tolos riders who charge directly at their enemies. It’s built to be especially sturdy in order to provide protection against the massive axes of the northerners. Even standing up with one’s own strength is difficult after falling off a tolos while wearing such a thing, so to defeat Geimalos despite how encumbered you were... I truly am impressed.”

Shin Ruu offered no response.

“Still, I suppose that is the strength of a hunter from the forest’s edge. Even here in Genos, many young people are not fully cognizant of just how formidable you are. That ignorance is the reason my fool of a son thought it a good idea to propose that contest of swordsmanship.”

Leeheim glanced away when his father’s eyes turned toward him. He was

wearing the same sort of sulky look as always.

Regardless, Luidross maintained a soft smile as his gaze returned to Shin Ruu. “Still, perhaps there is no helping that. While the outstanding strength of the hunters of the forest’s edge is spoken of in rumors, people rarely draw their blades in town. And naturally, you people of the forest’s edge are no band of outlaws. This is what led to my son underestimating your strength as he did.”

No one said anything in response to that claim.

“However, those of us who have been around for a while, such as Geimalos and myself, at least have some inkling of your true might. Something happened back when we were still young, you see... Yes, I suppose it was thirty years ago now. That time when a hunter from the forest’s edge drew his blade in town for the sake of vengeance.”

Was he talking about the incident where the head of a clan under the Beim ignored his leaders and attacked a bunch of people in town? Jiza Ruu’s already narrow eyes narrowed further as he stared at Luidross’s relaxed smile.

“That single man from the forest’s edge took down five criminals and the ten guards who had been tasked with escorting them out of town. I cannot imagine any normal swordsman ever accomplishing such a feat, no matter how skilled. I remember Geimalos and I trembling in fear here in our home, wondering if the people of the forest’s edge were truly human.”

Again, there was silence in response as Luidross continued on.

“Geimalos’s fear of you is what caused him to make such an error. That fact does nothing to lighten his crime, but I wished to discuss it in order to give you a full view of what led him to do such a thing. I hope that you understand.”

“In that case, I believe he should have stepped down from the challenge... But his pride as a knight would not allow that, correct?” Jiza Ruu asked.

“That is indeed the case,” Luidross replied with a nod. “Geimalos was famed as one of the foremost swordsmen in all of Genos, but he is already past his prime. He acted out of desperation to hold on to his pride, only to end up losing everything. It pains me greatly to see my own younger brother stray so far.”

“I cannot say I understand his mindset, but I believe I at least comprehend the

difficult position you find yourself in. A close relative of yours did something without your knowledge that caused a significant uproar, after all.”

“I am grateful,” Luidross said with yet another nod, remaining perfectly composed. “And the one who led Geimalos astray was none other than my own son, attempting to get revenge against you people of the forest’s edge. I am truly, utterly embarrassed. You are Reina Ruu, are you not?”

“Yes.”

“I see. You certainly are beautiful. I can see how this foolish boy became so taken with you.”

Reina Ruu remained expressionless under her translucent shawl. At the forest’s edge, it was considered poor manners for someone to praise the looks of a person they didn’t intend to marry.

Luidross then said, “I would like to clarify that one matter in particular before we begin this reconciliation banquet... Leeheim, what were your intentions in offering an expensive present to this woman from the forest’s edge?”

Leeheim turned back to face his father, looking extremely reluctant to do so.

“I simply wished to bring that girl here as a maid, father.”

“Oh, as a maid?”

“I tried to offer her a jeweled silver necklace in order to make a showing of the house of Saturas’s wealth. Did I break any laws?”

“Hmm. It isn’t very common for someone from outside the castle town to be employed as a maid, but it isn’t as if such a thing can’t be done. Even more so when the person in question is such a beautiful, skilled chef,” Luidross replied while twisting his mustache and contemplating a bit. Then he once again looked over at Jiza Ruu. “Proxy leading clan head, Sir Jiza Ruu... I believe Leeheim would have acted the same way toward a nameless girl from town. And if that girl suffered from poverty, she would have accepted without the slightest hesitation. After all, if one is given a job as a maid for the family of a count, they would never again face hardship.”

Jiza Ruu stared back at Luidross with a probing gaze. And as if to ease his

concerns, the count smiled back.

“However, we can’t expect everyone to be that eager to serve a noble house. Taking such a position would mean being unable to go home to see your parents very often, and would require you to cut ties with any men from the post town or the farms. If you were not prepared to cast aside your old life and devote yourself to serving the count’s household, you could never accept such a proposal.”

“I see. That is precisely why my younger sister Reina does not wish to become so deeply involved with nobles.”

“That is certainly a valid choice. While nobles are free to offer employment to outsiders, we have no right to coerce anyone. According to the laws of Genos, only slaves from Mahyudra can be bought and sold. Your sister’s refusal should have ended the matter... Leeheim, your immature refusal to let go of your attachment is what led to this disaster, is it not?”

Leeheim offered no objection, looking as sullen as ever.

Luidross continued in a pretentious tone, “I would have permitted this girl to serve as a maid rather than rebuking you for your actions, considering how beautiful and skilled she is. In fact, it would have pleased me quite a bit, having this as proof of your honest feelings toward the people of the forest’s edge and lack of prejudice. But given how once those hopes were dashed you failed to let go of your lingering attachment and even threw a tantrum like a child, any good intentions you might have had all went up in smoke.”

Still Leeheim said nothing.

“I’ve heard that the former head of the house of Turan would cruelly retaliate against any chefs who refused to serve him. And the current head of the house, Lady Lefreya, abducted a man from the forest’s edge to the castle town. You might not have committed a crime on that level, but you did involve Geimalos in your childish actions and brought about a terrible outcome. I hope you truly regret what you’ve done.”

“I do regret my actions... Still, I never imagined in my wildest dreams that my uncle feared the hunters of the forest’s edge so much, nor did I expect him to sully his hands with such a cowardly trick as a result,” Leeheim emotionlessly

stated, but then the young Leiriss suddenly stood up next to him. There was a strong light shining in his eyes as he looked over the room and gave a deep bow.

“It is the folly of my father Geimalos that has brought us to this point. My father broke his oath to Selva and sullied a contest between swordsmen, all of which is truly unforgivable. In order to atone for his crime, I shall accept any punishment you deem necessary along with him.”

“Geimalos is the only one who can pay for his crimes. There is no law in Genos that would allow you, his child, to be punished as well,” Melfried stated in a voice as cold as ice, causing Leiriss to bite down firmly on his lip. Luidross watched the young man for a few more moments, and then urged him to sit back down.

“At any rate, Geimalos has been stripped of his position as the head of the knights of Saturas and lost his knighthood as well. He will have to live out the rest of his life shouldering the shame of his perfidious deeds. Though you will have to suffer the shame of having a criminal as a father, you are nonetheless going to continue living as a knight. That should be sufficient to atone for your father’s crimes, correct?”

“Yes...”

“And you, Leeheim. Though you have not committed any crimes, how do you intend to act going forward after having caused such a misfortune to befall the house of Saturas and the people of the forest’s edge?”

“I swear to the western god that I shall restrain myself in the future, and take care to never again sully the name of my house,” Leeheim replied, his voice once again remaining emotionless. His eyes simply remained fixed on the empty plates lined up atop the table.

“Indeed. The house of Saturas is currently working with the house of Daleim in order to find a way to move on from the ruinous crimes of the house of Turan. That is why we must not make light of our bonds with the people of the forest’s edge. Isn’t that right, Sir Polarth?”

“Quite so. As we’ve discussed before, Sir Asuta and many others from the forest’s edge have been essential in helping expedite the flow of ingredients

from the castle town to the post town. You are well aware of the results they have achieved, Sir Luidross.”

Yes, the plan to popularize baked poitan in the post town in order to apply financial pressure on the house of Turan was something the houses of Daleim and Saturas had been cooperating on. And later on, when we had been trying to promote the usage of a bunch of other ingredients, every action Polarth had taken had benefited from the full cooperation of the house of Saturas. Yang’s work in the post town was also a part of our efforts to help the flow of ingredients.

“Though we have left the negotiations up to Sir Polarth, in a way, we have been comrades with the people of the forest’s edge ever since we combined our efforts to bring down the previous Count Turan. The post town was also even busier than usual during the recent revival festival, and I have no doubt that your people had a great deal to do with that, which is why I wish to ensure that the bond between us remains cordial, Sir Jiza Ruu.”

“We also feel that we need to form proper bonds with the nobles of Genos, and that requires both sides to be sincere.” Jiza Ruu appeared to be in a genial mood at a glance, and had spoken in a calm tone. “With that in mind, I would like to hear your son’s true feelings. It is true that he didn’t break any laws, but my relative, Shin Ruu, was summoned to the castle town by Duke Marstein Genos. Marstein was apparently unable to turn down a request from the next head of the house of Saturas, and for our part, we decided to go along with it because it seemed to be an opportunity to correct the relationship between the house of Saturas and the people of the forest’s edge.”

Incidentally, Polarth was the one who had brought these points to our attention, but now even he was shrugging a bit at how direct Jiza Ruu was being.

“Has he truly cast aside his ill will toward us people of the forest’s edge? I would like to have him confirm that once more.”

Luidross gave a firm nod in response to Jiza Ruu’s words. “A reasonable request. You heard what Sir Jiza Ruu said, Leeheim. What are your thoughts on the matter?”

“I would like to form a proper bond with the people of the forest’s edge from here on out as well, and will strive to see that goal brought to fruition... I swear to the western god here and now that I will meddle with them no further.” He was saying the right words, but he still wore a sour expression and wasn’t looking anyone in the eyes.

“Hmm,” Jiza Ruu hummed, stirring on his chair. “You certainly swear to your god quite readily. Do you consider such vows to be as weighty as the ones we make to the mother forest?”

“Of course. Oaths to the western god are absolute for citizens of Selva, and I can’t imagine any of us ever daring to break them.”

“I see. However, I’m afraid I don’t get the sense that your words are expressing your true thoughts.” As he spoke, Jiza Ruu’s already large body seemed to grow a size bigger. He was giving off an invisible pressure, which I hadn’t sensed from him in quite some time. Ai Fa, Shin Ruu, and Ludo Ruu had also risen ever so slightly off of their seats.

“The same goes for you as well, Count Saturas. Perhaps you told no falsehoods, but you seem to be reciting words that you have prepared in advance. And not just you, but all three members of the house of Saturas who are here today.”

Polarth and Eulifia were staring with looks of amazement, while Melfried’s gray eyes had narrowed as he observed Jiza Ruu closely. Anyone who had a warrior’s spirit would definitely have been able to sense the fierce aura the eldest son of the Ruu was giving off quite vividly.



Jiza Ruu was staring straight at Luidross. The noble had gone a bit pale, and he quickly replied, "This is a misunderstanding, Sir Jiza Ruu."

"Is that so? It seems to me that you decided on your words beforehand, and had these two follow your lead each time they spoke to us. Are you saying you did not plan out what would be said here today in advance, and did not instruct them to reply to your statements in a certain way?"

Leeheim was glancing at his father out of the corner of his eye, while Leiriss was sitting up perfectly straight with his eyes closed.

"It would be no matter if only you were doing it, but as for these two, I couldn't sense their true feelings at all. If they are simply saying whatever you have ordered them to, then what purpose is there in having them accompany you here?"

"I am the head of the house of Saturas. Is it not to be expected that members of my house would follow my guidance?" Luidross said as if to smooth things over, but Jiza Ruu silently shook his head.

"We do not defy the will of our clan head or the leading clan heads either, but that doesn't mean that we would ever speak untruths. Since our goal is to forge a proper bond between us, then ordering the members of your house around like this is unnecessary."

"No, but..."

"How old is your son?"

The sudden question seemed to intensify Luidross's panic as he wiped away cold sweat. "L-Leeheim turned twenty-two this silver month. Why exactly is that relevant?"

"Twenty-two, you say? I will soon turn twenty-four myself. I am the eldest son of the leading clan head Donda Ruu, whereas he is the eldest son of the house of Saturas. If we both inherit our fathers' posts, then we will be the leaders of the next generation who will have to maintain the ties between the forest's edge and your noble house. That is even more of a reason for me not to treat his true intentions as secondary." Jiza Ruu's narrowed eyes moved slowly from the count to his son, and Leeheim went as pale as a corpse. "Allow me to ask

again. Leeheim, eldest son of the house of Saturas, what are your true feelings on this matter?”

“I-I meant what I said! I have no intention of defying the orders of the head of my house, my father!”

“Then, if not for those orders, would you still wish to employ Reina even now?”

Leeheim looked as if he was about to keel over, chair and all. But it seemed that Polarth was feeling bad for him and had decided to lend the young heir a helping hand. “What’s the matter, Sir Leeheim? There’s no need to get flustered; not when you can simply tell them the truth. It is not as if you were thinking of abducting a person of the forest’s edge the way Lady Lefreya once did, correct?”

“O-Of course not! I would never commit a crime like that!”

“Then why have you been acting so hesitant here?”

From an outsider’s point of view, it had probably looked like Jiza Ruu had just been smiling affably this whole time. Polarth and Eulifia seemed like they found the sudden shift in attitude from Leeheim and the others to be more confusing than anything else.

With everyone’s eyes on him, Leeheim’s hands gripped the tablecloth, his shoulders trembling. Jiza Ruu’s intensity had even reduced Ludo Ruu to a frightened child in the past. Under the circumstances, I really couldn’t help but sympathize with Leeheim.

“I-I...”

“Hmm?”

“I cannot simply forget my desire to hire that girl. But even so, there’s no way I can disobey my father and Duke Genos... Nor can I hide the misery I feel...”

“Your attachment to Reina is that strong?” Jiza Ruu asked, a bit of admiration audible in his voice.

Then Reina Ruu chimed in from beside him, “It’s an honor to receive such a request from one of the nobles who governs Genos. However, we people of the

forest's edge cannot abandon our home. I hope that you can understand."

"I do... Even I understand that much..." Leeheim affirmed, hanging his head. His face was still pale.

Next, Jiza Ruu turned toward Leiriss. "What about you? What are your thoughts on the crime your father committed?"

"The head of our house didn't need to compel me to apologize. My father allowed his weakness to tempt him into committing a crime and made himself unworthy of being a knight. There is no excuse for what he did, so I wanted to apologize from the depths of my heart in his place." Leiriss then opened his eyes wide and looked at Shin Ruu with a piercing gaze. "However, I cannot help but wonder how strong a swordsman you must be, to terrify my father so badly and then defeat him in one blow. I feel a need I cannot ignore to discover the answer personally."

"I see. That explains why you've been giving off such a ferocious aura all this time. But now that I have heard your reason, I see that it is nothing to be concerned about," Jiza Ruu said with a satisfied nod. "We have no custom of competing against each other with blades, so we will not be able to grant that request immediately, but as long as you acknowledge your father's guilt, it shouldn't be a problem. And it's not as if you would simply attack Shin Ruu out of nowhere, correct?"

"Of course not. I wish for a true contest of swordsmanship with only our pride on the line."

"Then allow us to set that matter aside for later." With that, the invisible pressure Jiza Ruu had been giving off from his huge frame seemed to fade away, and his gaze then turned back toward Luidross. "I finally feel satisfied now that I have heard their true feelings on the matter. I came here as an acting leading clan head, so you'll have to forgive me for talking on and on."

"O-Of course... Well then, have you accepted our apologies...?"

"I, Jiza Ruu, eldest son of the leading clan head Donda Ruu, hereby accept the apologies that the house of Saturas has offered us. Though it may prove difficult to understand one another completely due to the differences in our customs and ways of life, I still wish to make an effort to forge a better relationship

between our two groups.”

“I see...” Luidross replied with a deep sigh. His stylish and youthful appearance suddenly seemed to have grown a good bit older. No surprise, really, considering that he had been facing down someone who had the resolve to take up arms against the lord of the land himself if the lord proved to be unsatisfactory.

“Well then, isn’t it about time to bring out the food, Sir Luidross? How about we start with a toast to a brighter future together?” Polarth casually chimed in, and with that, the peace banquet finally kicked off.

3

“We decided to bring in a number of outside chefs for today in order to treat everyone from the forest’s edge. Hopefully the meal will be to your liking, dear guests,” Luidross stated, noticeably having trouble retaking the reins of the conversation. In the meantime, several pages started laying out food and wine atop the table. “For drinks, we have not just mamaria wine, but also nyatta sparkling wine and spirits, and even medicinal drinks from Sym. Why not give them a taste to compare?”

“No, fruit wine will be enough for me,” Jiza Ruu responded.

“Well then, I hope you will at least enjoy the way our own head chef personally cut the drinks with additional fruit. For those of you who do not partake in alcohol, we have arow tea as well.”

All of us from the forest’s edge, aside from Jiza, Shin, and Sheera Ruu, soon had a cup of hot tea that gave off a pleasant raspberry smell placed in front of us. The scent was that of arow—a type of berry.

“Well then, a toast to an even brighter future that we hope to share with the people of the forest’s edge,” Luidross called out, and everyone raised their cups. Then, as we were placing them back on the table, an appetizer was laid out in front of everyone.

“Oh? What sort of dish is this?” Luidross asked.

“It is maroll meat dressed with hoboi sauce,” one of the pages said in

response to his question, since the chefs were holed up in the kitchen.

It was what you might call an hors d'oeuvre. Each of the pretty plates made of white ceramic had a bit of maroll on them, slathered in a pale brown paste—maroll being a type of large shrimp-like crustacean with a sweet taste. The only ones you could get in Genos were dried goods delivered from the capital, so these must have been rehydrated and then boiled. Their flesh—which was white with a touch of faint pink—had been separated into small pieces and topped with a paste made from the sesame-seed-like hoboi.

After giving our respective premeal chants, I brought some to my mouth and found that tau oil and sugar seemed to have been used in the hoboi paste, giving it an exquisite balance of saltiness and sweetness. As for the maroll, it had such a moist and chewy texture to it that it was hard to imagine it had previously been dried meat. It was packed with the umami of dried fish and overflowing with seafoody flavor.

Personally, I had no issues with it as an appetizer, and since the taste wasn't overly complicated, nobody from the forest's edge had any trouble eating it either. In fact, I even noticed that Ludo Ruu was really wolfing it down.

"Normally, we would be served a series of five dishes in a particular order at this point, but from what I understand, you have no custom of eating meals in this manner at the forest's edge. Because of that, we were planning on bringing everything out at once now, but what do you all say?"

"We shall follow the wishes of the master of the house," Jiza Ruu replied. Luidross gave him a nod, and then signaled the pages.

The next things to be brought out were the soup and fuwano dishes. The soup was a seafood dish with a spicy aroma, while the fuwano dish was a sandwich with a variety of ingredients between pieces of fuwano bread cut into squares. Also, the fuwano they used was the black variety from Banarm.

"This dish also has a wonderful smell," Toor Deen whispered into my ear. And I had to agree with her. The aroma it was giving off was fantastic. It was definitely spicy, but not to the point that the people of the forest's edge would find it unpleasant. It was a scent that was sure to stir up one's appetite.

"My, this is quite tasty. You give it a try too, Odifia," Eulifia urged with an

elegant smile, finally speaking up after remaining silent this whole time.

However, her young daughter just said, “I hate spicy things,” and turned away.

“It shouldn’t be too hot, even for you. They must have chosen this recipe with the young children who were going to be here in mind.”

Curious to taste it for myself, I slurped a bit of the reddish soup and found it indeed had a mellow flavor with just the right amount of a kick to it. It must have used either chitt seeds or those ira leaves we had tried out a few days back. Its spiciness was similar to that of chili peppers. Odifia and the people of the forest’s edge would be perfectly capable of enjoying it without having their tongues hurt too much.

The solid ingredients included pepe and nanaar, which were like garlic chives and spinach respectively, as well as soybean-like tau beans. The fish might have been the char-like rillione I had once used. It was a white meat with excellent flavor.

The pepe and nanaar lent some green to the red soup, and the well-boiled tau beans were nice and soft. And was the broth made from seaweed, perhaps? The level of spiciness was just right and it had a refreshing flavor that lingered on my tongue, making for a dish that tasted ever better than it smelled.

“What do you think?” Luidross asked.

Jiza Ruu politely replied, “I believe it is good. However, I am not well suited to judging the quality of dishes that don’t use any giba. If you want to hear what we think about the flavor, our chefs would be able to respond more meaningfully.”

“It’s quite delicious. This flavor seems like it goes better with fish than it would with giba too, right?” Reina Ruu quietly chimed in, and Sheera Ruu nodded along.

Then Polarth turned to look at me. “What do you think, Sir Asuta? You are quite knowledgeable even about dishes that do not use giba, correct?”

“Yes, it’s really good. It’s spicy, but still easy to eat. It was chosen out of consideration for not only Lady Odifia, but also the people of the forest’s edge,

wasn't it?"

Odifia and the people of the forest's edge were both slurping down the soup at a steady pace. Its perfect level of spiciness must have been working up their appetites too.

And the fuwano dish was every bit as good. The fillings included scrambled eggs, thin slices of bamboo shoot-like chamcham, crushed ramanpa nuts, and that sweet cinnamon-like herb. The chamcham had been heated through just enough, leaving it with a fantastic texture. Also, the whites of the scrambled eggs were just a bit transparent, so they seemed to have come from totos rather than kimyuus.

As for the bread, since it used black fuwano, it had a very crisp texture. They might have also added karon milk to the dough, as I could sense a faint sweetness that formed a delicate harmony with the fillings. I thought the black fuwano sandwich paired fantastically with the flavor of the soup.

The black fuwano sandwich didn't contain any added sugar and only had a light sweetness to it, whereas the seafood soup was mildly spicy and had abundant umami. The two dishes complemented each other very well. They were a fantastic match, and it felt like they felt like they were only truly complete because they were being served together.

"This really is fantastic. Yang tends to use this herb a lot. Is he the one in charge of the kitchen?"

Polarth was the one who answered. "No. I'm loath to say it, but Yang does not possess the skills needed to compete with this house's head chef. Sir Luidross is much more discerning when it comes to good food than my father, after all," he said with a rather formal expression on his face. What was probably going unsaid was the fact that the head chef for the house of Saturas would never be passed over in order to bring in the head chef for the house of Daleim under these circumstances. I felt a little embarrassed for having suggested it. I still didn't have a good grasp of noble formalities. "You people of the forest's edge will be preparing some dishes after this, correct? The chefs have been looking forward to meeting you in the kitchen."

"Oh, really?"

The only other fully fledged chefs we had interacted with were the ones who had been at the taste testing the other day, and out of all of them I only knew Timalo and Varkas by name.

The way these dishes were made was very different from Timalo's methods, and I had already heard that Varkas wasn't going to be here due to a request from another noble. Even if one of his apprentices had suddenly been added to the team here today, I had no idea what their skills were like.

Well, if I'll be meeting them later anyway, I suppose there's no point in trying to guess.

The one thing I could say for certain was that this chef possessed extraordinary skill. That was all that really mattered to me.

"I've been told that giba meat is just as good as karon, so I have very much been looking forward to this day, when I will finally be able to taste it," Luidross calmly interjected. "However, my understanding is that the value of giba meat hasn't been set in stone yet, so it is still too soon for it to be traded and worked with here in the castle town. And yet, we've been waiting for four months now, and the day when it will become available here seems to be nowhere in sight."

"Well... I believe it to be worth as much as karon torso at the very least, but if the price is set that high, it will become difficult for many in the post town to ever get their hands on it. Karon torso meat *has* started to find some usage in the post town, though. Once it becomes a reasonably common purchase there, I think at that point it should be no problem to finally set a price for giba meat," Polarth replied.

"Oh?" Eulifia questioned with a little tilt of her head. "So you're insisting on prioritizing the citizens of the post town? What is the purpose of doing that and forcing the residents of the castle town to go without?"

"It's so we don't antagonize the residents of the post town. Though we have managed to settle matters with the house of Turan once and for all, the actions of the previous head of the house have destroyed much of the trust the people of our lands had in us. If restricting ourselves from buying giba meat for a while lets us avoid angering them, then is that not what we should do?"

"So you're saying if it becomes impossible to eat giba meat in the post town, a

riot could occur? Asuta and his people have certainly gained quite a bit of influence there, haven't they?" Eulifia remarked with a chuckle, only for Melfried to fix his gray eyes on her.

"Why are you bringing that up again now? You were informed of what Duke Genos—my father and the lord of this land—intended to accomplish with his decision long ago, correct?"

"Well, I thought I understood his reasoning well enough, but upon further consideration, this state of affairs is truly quite astonishing. After all, the people of the post town are permitted to buy any of the ingredients that are available in the castle town, correct? And yet we are forced to refrain from purchasing giba meat."

"Sir Asuta and the people of the forest's edge are selling not only giba meat, but meals made with it as well. If the townsfolk become unable to experience that delicious cooking any longer, it very well could lead to a riot," Polarth explained.

That was something of an exaggeration, but he might have worded it like that to emphasize the importance of not buying up all the giba meat. Actually, since Eulifia had been the one to take the conversation in this direction, had she also been thinking about trying something like that? This noblewoman was not only graceful, but quite determined as well.

"Still, it is not as if Sir Leeheim had ill intentions in trying to purchase giba meat. He simply felt that such business dealings would bring prosperity to the people of the forest's edge, and that he could earn a fortune for his house at the same time. But I cannot imagine he would be so fixated on the idea that he would invite the animosity of those living in the Saturas lands of all places," Polarth declared.

However, Leeheim just looked troubled as he glanced around the room. He was likely trying to figure out whether Polarth was being supportive of him or talking down to him. But it was only natural that he would be confused. The peculiar relationship between the nobles, the residents of their lands, and the people of the forest's edge was a difficult one to fully grasp.

"Er, I actually have a proposal on that front," I chimed in.

“What is it?” Luidross asked, his benign gaze turning my way.

“You see, we’ve been making giba sausages at the forest’s edge, but since it’s a type of smoked meat, they take a great deal of effort to prepare. Removing the moisture also means the meat loses a lot of weight, and that makes them unaffordable for a lot of folks in the post town, so I’ve been wondering for a while if it would be possible to sell them in the castle town.”

“Hmm? But smoked meat is what travelers and soldiers on the field of battle eat, is it not? Fresh karon meat can be bought from Dabagg, which is just half a day away by tolos, so I can’t imagine we’d have any reason to eat such a thing...”

“Yes, but the flavor of the meat condenses when it’s smoked. It also doesn’t get dried out as much as the stuff that soldiers eat, so while it doesn’t last as long, it’s very delicious. I had some folks who really knew their meat give it a try when we traveled to Dabagg, and their reactions were quite positive. Although, some stuff did end up happening that made us decide not to expand our business out there.”

“Yes, that was a most unexpected occurrence. And thinking back on it, that little incident was related to the former head of the house of Turan as well,” Polarth said in an amused tone. And now that he had brought that up, I recalled that it was Melfried who had dispatched an investigatory unit to Dabagg after that.

I then said, “Naturally, it’s important for us to take Duke Genos’s judgment into consideration whenever we think about doing business in the castle town, but I did bring along some sausages for taste testing today. I’d be grateful if everyone would give it a try, to see whether or not it’s suitable to be sold here in the castle town.”

“Oh? You brought a gift in addition to your cooking?”

“Yes. It’s the least I can do as thanks for allowing me to intrude on this banquet between the Ruu clan and the house of Saturas.”

Ai Fa gave a silent nod.

Seeming to have completely recovered by this point, Luidross looked like a

true noble again now as he smiled and replied, “That is much appreciated. I consider myself to be rather discerning when it comes to the quality of food, though not to the extent of the previous Count Turan or Duke Genos. I will be sure to give your sausages a proper try in the days to come.”

“Thank you very much.”

“But first, you must enjoy our hospitality. Now then, why don’t we bring out the next dish? We mustn’t keep our guests waiting.”

With that, the pages brought out a good number of plates once again. It was finally time for the vegetable and meat dishes. When one of them was placed before him, Ludo Ruu bluntly asked, “What’s this stuff?”

“It is a vegetable and dried milk dish,” one of the pages rather broadly explained, perhaps because they hadn’t heard the details.

It was a strange dish, square in shape, around ten centimeters on each side and two centimeters deep, colored green and red in a marbled pattern, and partially coated in gooey dried milk. Though we had been told it was made of vegetables, it was impossible to guess which ones just from looking at it.

On the other hand, the meat dish was just simple grilled meat. It was cut flat and sautéed, and then a small amount of deep green sauce had been drizzled on top. It was only accompanied by a crispy bit of thin baked black fuwano.

“This is a grilled gyama dish.”

When we heard that explanation, Toor Deen and I immediately shared a look. As I examined it, I could clearly tell that it wasn’t smoked meat, but rather a sauté prepared with fresh meat. Since Varkas had purchased all the live gyama to be had in this region, the dish must have been prepared by someone with ties to him.

“Gyama meat, you say? This will be my first time eating it as well. I’ve been told that they are wild beasts just like giba, so I wonder what sort of flavor this will have.” Luidross chimed in, sounding honestly impressed. Polarth and Eulifia’s eyes were also sparkling with anticipation.

“Hmm. I like dried milk, but this stuff below it doesn’t even look like food.” Ludo Ruu was the only person to complain, poking the square dish with a metal

spoon. The object's shape collapsed just from that gentle nudge and the young hunter yelped, "Ah! This stuff's as soft as melted dried milk. Is it really food?"

"Varkas made dishes that didn't look like food too, right? His vegetable creation in particular took a really bizarre form," Reina Ruu whispered to calm him down. However, Ludo Ruu just looked even more displeased.

"I wouldn't know. I've never been chosen for guard duty for those events."

"Oh, right. It was Dan Rutim and the others who were with us that time... Well, still, I'm certain that one of Varkas's apprentices made this, so you shouldn't have anything to worry about." Apparently, Reina Ruu had also arrived at that conclusion with the arrival of the gyama meat. She then went ahead and took a bite of the vegetable dish first, and its taste made her close her eyes and sigh deeply. "It's certainly unusual... How would you even go about turning vegetables into something like this?"

My curiosity now thoroughly piqued, I went for the vegetable dish first too.

It was soft enough that it offered no resistance to a spoon slicing through it, and the dried milk on top seemed to have some extra milk or something added to it. It was gooey like the dried milk fondue we'd had back in Dabagg, and didn't seem to be solidifying in the least. And somehow, the square veggie shape underneath was just as mushy as the dried milk.

It's like a melting jellied broth or something.

I carved off a little bit and brought it to my mouth. The first thing that hit me was the rich flavor of the dried milk, but then I picked up on the tastes of all sorts of vegetables. Among them, I could clearly make out the sourness of tarapa and the bitterness of pula. The rest all had a mild sweetness, and there seemed to be a whole lot of either the carrot-like nenon or the cabbage-like tino.

It's also got the spinach-like nanaar and zucchini-like chan...and that's all I can make out. They were all made into a sort of paste, but they weren't fully blended together, so the flavors remain separated.

It all seemed to be held together with oil from some kind of seafood—I could sense the abundant umami of fish in it.

You could make it a little more solid if you had a refrigerator, but I guess this is the best you could do in a place as hot as Genos. The vegetables must have been made into a paste and partially mixed together, then solidified with fish oil.

It was a really strange dish. However, I wouldn't quite call it complex. The ingredients were all separate enough to create that marbled surface. Thanks to that, you could clearly pick out the tarapa and the nenon, for example. Furthermore, the flavors of the dried milk and fish were quite strong, giving the taste a clear direction to follow, and the sourness and bitterness were kept to being merely an accent, so it wouldn't be confusing to one's tongue.

"Well, I guess I wouldn't call it bad," Ludo Ruu remarked as he pulled his plate of meat closer.

Polarth smiled at him. "This meat dish is truly delicious. I wonder if it will be able to satisfy all of you from the forest's edge as well."

It smelled prominently of herbs. The green sauce must have had an herbal base. Its overall aroma was fairly spicy, and yet also refreshing.

Using a knife and fork, I cut into the meat. It seemed to be neither especially tough nor tender. However, I saw hardly any red or fatty meat.

The smoked gyama meat I've had has always been pretty fatty, so maybe it's a different cut. Could this be from a thigh or something?

When I brought the slice to my mouth, I found it had just the right amount of chewiness. Though it wasn't fatty, it was moist and had excellent texture. Its flavor was pretty unusual, but the herb sauce alleviated that aspect. The herb in question, by the way, had a stinging pepper-like flavor.

It was definitely very different from pork or beef. Gyama looked similar to goats, so was their meat similar too? Unfortunately, I had never tasted goat meat, so I couldn't compare them.

I've been told that chitt seeds are essential to have when you're preparing the meat of gyama raised in the mountains due to the stench it picks up, but this one must have been raised on the plains. It's a fairly distinctive meat, but it isn't difficult to eat at all.

In summary, it was delicious. Of course, I tended to enjoy unusual meats, so it

probably made sense that I'd find gyama more satisfying than karon.

"Yeah, this is just plain tasty," Ludo Ruu said, wearing a look of satisfaction. Ai Fa, Jiza Ruu, and Shin Ruu didn't look particularly displeased as they ate it either.

As I was mentally taking note of that, though, Ai Fa leaned in close to me and asked, "Asuta, this meat comes from the animals we saw before at that manor, correct?"

"Yeah, that's right."

"It isn't bad. Or at the very least, I feel like it's more filling than the meat of those karon and kimyuus beasts."

Perhaps that was because of the difference between livestock and wild game. Of course, I didn't know for sure whether those gyama were wild beasts or domesticated, but thinking of it that way made the most sense to me. And maybe this was another hint about how the ancestors of the people of the forest's edge might have come from Sym.

At any rate, I was glad the meat was to their tastes. Honestly, I never expected that there would be food in the castle town that the people of the forest's edge would enjoy without any reservations, not even in my wildest dreams. Our chefs were one thing, with inquisitive spirits sometimes being able to overpower their personal preferences, but seeing the hunters eating it without any problems, when they had shown no interest whatsoever in anything but giba meat up until now, that felt downright miraculous.

"Oh, and this weird vegetable stuff might not be half bad either, if you have it together with the meat. And it was really good idea for them to have this fuwano bread on the side too," Ludo Ruu said, offering his full assessment.

Luidross nodded in satisfaction as he watched his guests enjoying themselves. "Well then, last up is dessert. I hope that you'll enjoy this part of the meal just as much as the rest of them."

The dessert we were wrapping things up with unsurprisingly also used black fuwano. It had been made into flat pieces of bread and had thin slices of a pink fruit placed on top. That was minmi fruit, which was similar to peaches. They

must have been baked in an oven or something along with the black fuwano, judging from how they were glistening and giving off even more of their sweet aroma than usual.

I didn't have anything to complain about with this dessert either. It had a light sweetness and its flavor was excellent. The light texture from the black fuwano was also quite pleasant. On top of that, the bread had a sesame-seed-like accent to its taste, which must have come from the hoboi seeds that had also been used in the entree. They had probably been ground into a paste and then kneaded into the dough. The surface of the bread had a thin layer of panam honey smeared on top, but the sweetness from the minmi fruit was the focus of the dish.

"My father, the leading clan head Donda Ruu, told me not to have high expectations for the cooking of the castle town. That no matter how fine the dishes you prepare may be, our tongues are unable to appreciate them as you do. But if nothing else, I can confidently say that not a single one of the dishes presented today was bad," Jiza Ruu declared.

"Oh?" Polarth said with a small start. "That's quite a surprise. It's true that the leading clan heads of the forest's edge have often frowned when partaking of the castle town's cuisine, and I even recall them looking displeased with some of the giba dishes Sir Asuta prepared for our consumption." He might have been referring to how Dari Sauti had been displeased with my cutlets fried in reten oil. If so, then he really was remarkably perceptive. "Sir Jiza Ruu, and also Sir Shin Ruu, is this not essentially your first time eating food from the castle town? In which case, this cannot even be chalked up to you growing accustomed to the cooking we serve here... You must have strong compatibility with the chef."

"That's true. From my perspective, I don't believe Timalo's cooking, which the leading clan heads once ate, was significantly inferior to this," Eulifia agreed, sounding amused. Meanwhile, her young daughter was tugging at the hem of her elegant dress.

"Hey, is it still not time for Toor Deen's sweet?"

"Hmm? Ah, yes. We'll get to enjoy one of your desserts today, will we not, Toor Deen?"

“Uh, yeah...” Toor Deen replied with a nod while shrinking up.

Luidross glanced over at her, twisted his mustache, and remarked, “Hmm... In that case, I suppose it is at last time to sample the giba cooking of the forest’s edge. My deepest apologies to all of you chefs for making you rush off.”

“Not at all. This is our job,” Reina Ruu said with a nod, rising from her chair, and the rest of us followed suit.

Ai Fa was the only guard who would be accompanying us to the kitchen. As for Sufira Zaza, she looked a bit torn but ultimately decided to remain at the table. As we exited the banquet hall, I glanced at Leeheim and Leiriss out of the corner of my eye, but the two of them were just sitting quietly, pecking away at the remainder of their food.

“Today’s dishes were all simply wonderful. I felt surprised in a completely different way than when I had Varkas’s cooking,” Sheera Ruu whispered as a page led us down the hallway. “Varkas’s dishes left me feeling quite confused, but today’s were, how should I put it...? I felt like they were giving me a sense of relief as I ate them.”

“I feel the same way. It must have been one of Varkas’s apprentices who prepared it, but which one was it?” I replied.

“Doesn’t it have to be that old man, Tatumai? He seemed to be in charge of the apprentices,” Sheera Ruu asked.

“I think it was the southerner, Bozl. He’s always been quite friendly toward us people of the forest’s edge, so don’t you think he ought to be able to discern our preferences?” Reina Ruu said.

However, both of them turned out to be wrong.

We didn’t have to walk for much longer before we arrived at a door to a kitchen, and when it swung open we found a young man and woman awaiting us there... Shilly Rou and Roy.

“Oh, so it was you two who cooked everything for us?” I called out, as Reina Ruu had been left at a loss for words. Shilly Rou had already removed her white mask, and was looking our way with a chilly gaze. “Varkas had a different job to take care of today, right? Is it okay that you’re not helping out with that?”

“We were helping with that earlier, until the lower third hour. Beyond that point, we were no longer needed, so Varkas ordered us to accept this job at the Saturas manor,” Shilly Rou replied, sounding quite displeased as she did so.

Roy shrugged, standing next to her. “I was just an assistant, of course. But I managed to earn my first pay since I started working under Varkas... Shilly Rou’s cooking was good, right?”

“Yes, it was delicious. Even the men of the forest’s edge offered no complaints, and they usually only ever show interest in giba meat.”

“Well, of course. We made sure to pair things with the people of the forest’s edge in mind,” Roy said, showing me a grin for the first time in a while. “I told Shilly Rou everything I knew about your tastes. The vegetable dish wasn’t an issue, was it?”

“Well, some people thought it was kinda dubious at first, but everyone ate it in the end.”

“Glad to hear it. That dish has a rather strange texture, so that was the one thing I was concerned about.”

Roy was smiling at us dauntlessly, but Shilly Rou remained silent.

After looking both of them over, Reina Ruu finally spoke up. “So, you gave her information on which sort of dishes to prepare? You’ve become that familiar with the tastes of the people of the forest’s edge?”

“Huh? Yeah, at least somewhat. I heard all your comments about Timalo’s cooking, after all. And I’ve tasted the food you serve plenty of times too, so I do have some idea of what you like.”

“I see...” Reina Ruu replied, casting her gaze downward. I saw a bit of frustration on her face for some reason.

“So it’s your turn next, right? If you have any extra food to spare, could we have some too? I mean, we did treat you to gyama meat, after all.”

Perhaps Roy was feeling a bit lighter after having opened up to Reina Ruu the other day and getting some of the load off his chest. I felt a little bad for Reina Ruu, but seeing him smiling again after so long made me feel warm inside.

“What, you aren’t cooking anything?” Roy complained to me as he watched Reina Ruu and the others working away hurriedly out of the corner of his eye.

“Nope, I’m not. I’m just a cooking assistant for today. The guests of honor at this dinner are the members of the Ruu clan, so it felt appropriate to leave the cooking up to them. Oh, except that Lady Odifia requested a dessert from Toor Deen, so I think I’ll help her a little with that.”

“Hmph. You’re saying there’s no need for you to step up on an occasion like this? You sure are acting like a big shot.”

“I told you, that’s not how it is. I’m just trying not to overstep my bounds and insert myself where I’m not needed.”

The food preparation was progressing steadily as we were talking. Reina and Sheera Ruu were making a meat dish while Toor Deen was preparing a dessert, filling the kitchen with a wonderfully complex aroma.

“Asuta, will you give this a taste? The meat has been steeping for a pretty long time, so I decreased the amount of sauce I added at the end.”

“Okay, let me see... Yeah, this seems good. I wouldn’t have any issue with serving this at the stalls.”

Reina and Sheera Ruu had prepared an improved myamuu giba that now included ginger-like keru root. They also had a side of tino, aria, and nenon salad. The two of them had put a lot of effort into studying how to make a good dressing too.

Meanwhile, Toor Deen had made pastry-like sweets that utilized gigi leaves. Some were cocoa-flavored and topped with white cream, while others were plain with cocoa-flavored cream. She had used poitan to make her dough, so this was an augmentation of her specialty dish, which she had turned into a real masterpiece by adding gigi leaves.

“So you’re using keru root and gigi leaves? Isn’t it rather reckless to employ ingredients you only learned about four days ago when cooking for an event such as this?” Shilly Rou called out, as she had been observing from a short distance away. Reina and Sheera Ruu offered no response, so I went ahead and

replied instead.

“As I said back then, we had similar ingredients in my home country. All we had to do was incorporate the new flavors into our existing dishes.”

“But you aren’t the one preparing these dishes. However well you taught them how to use these new ingredients, it would still take a great deal of skill to ensure that the dishes come out tasting right under these circumstances.”

“Well, in that case, I’d say the success of these dishes is entirely their own accomplishment.”

To say nothing of Toor Deen’s sweets, Reina and Sheera Ruu’s myamuu giba was in no way inferior to my own cooking. They had prepared the dish countless times over the last several months, after all. With such a firm foundation, of course they wouldn’t have any issues, even when handling an ingredient with a flavor as strong as keru root.

Toor Deen, meanwhile, was fully capable of making far better confections than I could at this point. It had only been two days since I had taught her how to use gigi leaves, but two days of practice was all she needed to level up her ability to use gigi leaves, sugar, and karon milk in combination. It wouldn’t take her long to come up with something even better, but I thought her current version was more than ready to be shown off.

“Still, if you think we’re trying to fool you, go ahead and give it a try. I know I at least have no issues with how they turned out.”

Reina Ruu, Sheera Ruu, and Toor Deen had brought extra ingredients in hopes of having Shilly Rou and Roy sample their food. The meat dish and desserts were placed on some small clay plates, and Shilly Rou reluctantly picked up a fork-shaped utensil. A mere few seconds later, she had shock written all over her face.

Roy had started with the myamuu giba, and now he was letting out a groan. “I certainly can’t think of anything to criticize. But I never would have imagined myamuu and keru root would go so well together.”

“Really? Well, they do both have powerful flavors and scents.”

“Hmm, and the flavor seems mellower, compared to what you serve in the

post town,” Roy remarked.

“Yes,” Reina Ruu said with a nod. “The citizens of the post town and travelers tend to prefer stronger flavors than the people of the forest’s edge, so we adjust the recipe with that in mind... But I’ve started to feel like I want to sell the version of this dish that I think is the most delicious, as a person of the forest’s edge.”

“Hmm? Well, I don’t know anything about what people in the post town like, but if anyone complains about getting food this good for a mere two red coins, they’re sure to be struck down by the wrath of the western god.”

“So this dish is to your liking as well?”

“Huh? I just said there wasn’t anything to criticize, right? I’m just wondering how you managed to master an ingredient as troublesome as keru root this well in just four days.”

Reina Ruu breathed a sigh of relief at that. When I noticed, I felt the urge to show her some more support myself.

“Actually, I didn’t teach them how to use keru root until two days ago, so they weren’t working with it for those first two days.”

“Two days...” Shilly Rou muttered. It looked like there was more confusion swirling in her eyes than antagonism now. Even I had been surprised at how well they had adapted their recipes, so it must have been an even bigger shock for these chefs from the castle town.

“This sweet seems to have been made with a great deal of care as well. Does this flavor come from gigi leaves?” Roy asked.

“Ah, yes. These pastries are pretty impressive too, aren’t they?”

“Hmm. Without a doubt, this topping was made using your technique of whipping the fat of karon milk. And she added gigi leaves and sugar to that?”

Even just judging it by its appearance, Toor Deen’s sweet was already fantastic. The cocoa-colored base contrasted wonderfully with the white cream, and the same went for the yellowish-white base and the cocoa-colored cream. Furthermore, the balance she had achieved between the bitterness of the gigi

leaves, the sweetness of the sugar, and the mellowness of the karon milk was superb. Incidentally, Rimee Ruu's chatchi mochi had also turned out fantastic. Both of them seemed to have exquisite instincts and talent when it came to making desserts.

"Confections are your specialty, aren't they, Shilly Rou? So I'm sure you can give a more precise evaluation than I can," Roy urged, but Shilly Rou's shoulders just shook ever so slightly, and she offered no response. After looking at her for a few moments longer, Roy simply shrugged. "Hey, Asuta, I heard from Shilly Rou that you're inviting townsfolk to the settlement at the forest's edge tomorrow."

"Huh? Ah, yes, that's right."

"Then, you people of the forest's edge will be preparing food for them?"

"Yes, since it's a welcome banquet. We were invited to a celebration in the Daleim lands for the sun god's revival festival, so this is to repay them for that."

"I see... In that case, could I come along too?"

Though his words shocked us all, the only person who immediately reacted was none other than Shilly Rou.

"Wh-What are you saying? Why would you even think about spending one of your rare days off on something like that?"

"I'm asking *because* it's a day off. The fact that they're holding such a major gathering on one of the few days when I don't have to work has to be a gift from the western god, wouldn't you say?" Roy remarked, shrugging yet again. "Didn't I tell you? I asked Varkas to take me on as an apprentice because I felt overwhelmed by the skill the people of the forest's edge have. I can't help but be curious about what sort of place the chefs who can prepare such amazing dishes live in, what tools they use, and what conditions they cook under."

"E-Even so..."

"Are you saying you *aren't* curious? The people of the forest's edge didn't even know how to bake fuwano just a few months back. And yet, now they've become skilled enough to serve their cooking to nobles. That's not something I can just ignore."

Shilly Rou silently bit down on her lip, as Roy glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. Then he reached up and scratched his head.

“It’s not like I’m telling you that you have to come along. But I’m free to do as I please with my time off, right? It’s not like I’ve even been officially hired in the first place... So, what do you say, Asuta?”

“Well... The leading Ruu clan is in charge of the event, so I’d need their permission before adding more guests...” I replied, my gaze turning toward Reina Ruu, who was staring at Roy with an utterly bewildered look.

“You want to visit the settlement? Even though you’re a resident of the castle town?”

“It’s not *that* weird of an idea, is it? After all, you people of the forest’s edge have been coming here to the castle town left and right,” Roy said, wearing an uncharacteristically awkward look. “You’re a daughter of the Ruu clan, right? I’m sure you’re not fond of the idea of inviting someone like me to your settlement, but could you please accept? It’s not like I’m just asking on a whim.”

Reina Ruu looked over at me and Sheera Ruu with a terribly troubled expression.

Sheera Ruu smiled soothingly at her in response. “I don’t think we have any particular reason to refuse. And besides, Jiza Ruu is here today, so wouldn’t it be best to leave the decision to him?”

“Yes, that’s true, but...”

“It’s quite shocking, isn’t it? That a resident of the castle town would want to visit our settlement at the forest’s edge? If our cooking is what led to this shift in his thinking, then I’d say that’s something to be proud of,” Sheera Ruu remarked, and then she turned toward Shilly Rou with the smile still on her face. “What about you? If an apprentice of Varkas such as yourself were to feel the same way, that would make me even prouder.”

“Wh-Why would I go to such a shady gathering?!”

“It isn’t shady. We just wish to form proper bonds with the townsfolk. And your cooking was able to please us even though it was without giba meat, which feels like it must have been the work of a talent as rare as Varkas’s, if not

more so. I can't imagine what would make me happier than having an opportunity to befriend someone like you." Her words were so unmistakably heartfelt that even Shilly Rou was unable to snap back with cruelty, instead being left looking blatantly bewildered. "Jiza Ruu is here as a proxy for the leading clan head. I don't believe he would refuse the two of you, so please, think it over until the banquet ends."

Shilly Rou still looked at a loss for words.

"Well then, isn't it about time for us to be heading back? We don't want the food to get cold," Sheera Ruu finally noted.

"Ah, right," Reina Ruu agreed.

With that, we left Shilly Rou and Roy behind in the kitchen and returned to the banquet hall.

While Reina Ruu and Shilly Rou had found themselves thrown all out of sorts by the way things had developed, Sheera Ruu had managed to wrap things up nicely. A calm, sincere personality like hers was really effective at times such as this. Considering I was only ever able to make Shilly Rou angry, that definitely wasn't something I was capable of pulling off.

When we made it back to the others, we found them drinking wine and having a nice, friendly chat. It looked like the lord of the house, Luidross; Polarth; and Eulifia were leading the charge with the merrymaking. Leeheim and Leiriss looked the same as they had when we left, but it seemed the conversation fortunately hadn't taken any uncomfortable turns.

"Thank you for waiting. This is a grilled giba dish using keru root and myamuu," Reina Ruu explained, and the pages started portioning out the dish.

When the highly fragrant myamuu giba was placed before him, Luidross seemed very impressed with it. "Oh? What a truly wonderful aroma. And I don't believe I've ever heard of keru root before..."

"Keru root is an ingredient that was brought here by some merchants from Jagar. I've not yet tasted it myself, and I certainly never expected to have a chance to try it so soon," Polarth joyfully chimed in, being the first to pick up his fork and knife. He sliced off a bit of myamuu giba and brought it to his mouth.

Immediately, his plump face broke out in a look of pure bliss. “Yes, this is truly delicious. It is in every way the equal of karon and gyama. I know what I said before, but I too can hardly wait for the day when giba can be more easily enjoyed in the castle town.”

“My, you’re right. This dish was prepared by you ladies from the Ruu clan rather than Asuta, correct?” Eulifia asked.

“Yes.” Reina Ruu nodded in response to her question. “Asuta taught us how to make it, but Sheera Ruu and I prepared it. We intend to sell this dish at our stalls in the post town from here on out.”

“How wonderful. It seems it truly was more than just your beauty that captivated Leeheim.”

“Indeed. You could have easily served in our kitchen with such skill. But as that is not a wish that can ever be fulfilled, we’ll simply have to rouse our own chefs to improve themselves instead,” Luidross rather hurriedly interjected, prompting Eulifia to let out a teasing giggle.

Then, right across from her, Ludo Ruu smiled and added, “Ahh, this is so good. The dishes before were great too, but I just feel better about eating giba meat.”

“Oh my, you have quite an adorable smile.” Eulifia was apparently happy to poke fun at Ludo Ruu as well. “I’ve thought this for quite some time, but you people of the forest’s edge have such fine appearances, men and women both. You’re slender like the people of Sym, but also have such defined features like the people of Jagar... You look remarkably strong, and yet graceful as well.”

“No guy appreciates being called graceful or cute... Wait, am I going to get reprimanded for talking to you like that?”

“I do not mind. Being able to speak with all of you is what I have been hoping for,” Eulifia said. Then her gaze turned toward the head of the table. “Besides, the gentleman over there, Shin Ruu, was invited to that contest of swordsmanship because Lady Besta and Lady Selanju wished for it. Leeheim was also infatuated with Reina Ruu, and my daughter Odifia is quite taken with Toor Deen’s sweets. Perhaps you could say these troubles arose because you people of the forest’s edge are all so terribly charming, both inside and out.”

“Indeed. That’s precisely why we must put more consideration into how we interact and form connections with each other,” Polarth added with a nod.

It was then that a strained voice interjected, “Um...” I turned toward it without thinking, and found it had come from Shin Ruu. “I’m not very familiar with how I should address nobles either. However, there’s one thing I wish to ask...”

“What is it? There’s no need to worry about embellishing your speech here. Feel free to speak your mind,” Luidross said, though a bit of nervousness was showing on his face. Since Shin Ruu was the one Geimalos had plotted against, he was also the person Luidross felt he needed to be most cautious around, presumably.

At any rate, Shin Ruu nodded with a tense look on his face, then somewhat awkwardly continued, “If I was invited to compete in swordsmanship due to my skill as a hunter, that would be no problem. However, if it is to please young women...I would like to refrain from being involved in that in the future.”

“Oh? It is not as if those girls wished to employ you, though. Their desire was no different from wishing to offer a flower to an elegant knight, at the very most.”

“But I am a hunter of the forest’s edge, not a knight... And we people of the forest’s edge, well, we believe it is appropriate to maintain a polite distance from those we do not wish to marry,” Shin Ruu stated, his cheeks slowly turning redder all the while. He was probably having trouble forcing himself to speak about things he had so little experience with.

“I see. So the people of the forest’s edge are that sensitive about relationships between men and women, then?” Eulifia openly remarked, with Luidross seeming hesitant to speak. “Are such differences in the ways we think the origin of this whole dispute? Jiza Ruu also seemed especially worried about Reina Ruu.”

“It should be obvious that taking a partner and bringing children into this world is the most sacred of endeavors. Relations between men and women cannot be treated lightly. Are you saying nobles do not similarly value their relatives?” Jiza Ruu said.

“Of course we do, and yet... Well, I suppose it would be immodest for a noblewoman like me to say anything further,” Eulifia replied, sticking out her tongue in a truly unladylike manner. At that point, her coolheaded husband finally chimed in for the first time in a while.

“Shin Ruu, hunter of the forest’s edge, is it your true belief that you should not shirk invitations to the castle town related to swordsmanship?”

“Yes, though I *am* a hunter, not a swordsman.”

“And yet you possess skill with a blade great enough to defeat Geimalos in a single strike. Few can claim to be capable of such a thing among the knights of Genos,” Melfried stated, his gaze then turning toward Jiza Ruu. “Jiza Ruu, acting leading clan head of the forest’s edge, I wish to propose something to you.”

“Hmm? What is it?”

I had an inkling that this was the first time Jiza Ruu and Melfried had ever spoken face-to-face, and for some reason that caused me to feel a little nervous.

“I wish to invite a hunter of the forest’s edge to a swordsmanship tournament. Would that not be a way for you to show all of Genos your strength?”

“Why would we agree to such a thing?”

“There are two reasons... No, three, I suppose. Firstly, Genos is a peaceful land, so it is difficult to cultivate adept swordsmen here. In an effort to overcome that problem, the gates of such tournaments are opened wide. Even failed mercenaries can participate, as long as they are not criminals forbidden from entering town.”

“Hmm...”

“It would sully the pride of a knight of Genos to lose to such a ruffian in swordsmanship. It is this that motivates our knights to spend their days polishing their skill with a sword, so if the exceptionally powerful hunters of the forest’s edge were to be included, your presence would spur the knights of Genos to work even harder. That is the first reason.”

Melfried then turned toward Leiriss, who had remained silent for quite some time.

“The second reason is to allow Leiriss to deal with the feelings he mentioned earlier. Until he experiences the strength you hunters possess personally, he will remain unable to forgive his father’s weakness. I believe Leiriss should be allowed to truly learn why his father Geimalos feared the hunters of the forest’s edge so greatly.”

Leiriss remained silent, but his eyes were blazing bright as he stared at Melfried, Jiza Ruu, and Shin Ruu.

“Of course, those are both ways that this would be convenient for us. They are in no way reasons for your people to accept my proposal. However, I believe it would be profitable for you as well.”

“That would be the third reason you referred to, then? Let’s hear it.”

“The third reason is to make the strength of the hunters of the forest’s edge known to all. As Sir Luidross stated before, many among the younger generations are ignorant of your true capabilities. The same goes for outsiders visiting Genos as well. That is why you felt the need to bring so many guards to town during the revival festival, correct? And yet, thirty years ago no scoundrel would ever have dared to meddle with a person of the forest’s edge.”

“I see... So you’re saying the strength of the hunters of the forest’s edge was made known thirty years ago when a terrible crime was committed, but now we should do it through proper means?”

“That is precisely right. Furthermore, we are currently advancing discussions pertaining to carving a path through the forest of Morga. If our plans should come to fruition, a great number of travelers will start passing through the forest quite close to your settlement. If those travelers were to underestimate the strength of you hunters, there is a chance that another unfortunate incident may occur. This is a concern that has been weighing heavily on me.” With his expression not changing in the least, Melfried continued. “The tragedy from thirty years ago must not be repeated. As such, I believe there is a need for the people of the forest’s edge to once again make their strength known to the world at large. Those are my honest feelings on the matter.”

“Then, regardless of how far a hunter of the forest’s edge may advance in this tournament of yours, you would not mind it?”

“No. In fact, I feel it is important that they win. Of course, your man would likely have no difficulty advancing. At the previous tournament, I was awarded the title of sword king...but despite that, I cannot say whether or not I would be capable of winning an even match with Shin Ruu.”

Ai Fa had judged Shin Ruu and Melfried to be roughly equal in strength.

Silence fell over the room for a moment, but then Jiza Ruu nodded. “I see. I have listened very carefully to what you had to say. However, this will require the approval of not only the Ruu clan, but the Zaza and Sauti as well, so I will need to return to the forest’s edge and convey your words to our people there. Is that acceptable?”

“Of course. I shall await a favorable response.”

At that point, his daughter peered around her mother so she could address the stone-faced man, saying, “Father, are you done talking? Can I eat Toor Deen’s sweet now?”

“Ah, excuse me. I should have saved this discussion until everyone was done eating. My apologies to all of you, Sir Luidross and my fellow guests.”

After Melfried’s formal statement had concluded, the pages were at last able to distribute Toor Deen’s sweets. Enough time had passed for the cream to have deflated a good bit, but Odifia’s eyes were still sparkling with anticipation.

“What a wonderful presentation. Did you use poitan once again, perhaps?” Eulifia asked with a bright smile.

“Y-Yes. And an ingredient called gigi leaves from Sym,” Toor Deen replied with a timid bow.

Odifia was unable to wait any longer and picked up her utensils, shoveling a bite of the sweet into her mouth and getting cream all around her lips. Then, while she was still chewing, she turned toward Toor Deen.



“Toor Deen, it’s really tasty.”

“Th-Thank you.”

No matter how tasty she found it, though, Odifia’s expression hardly shifted at all. Her French-doll-like features came from her mother, while she got her expressionlessness from her father.

Still, even if her expression was unchanging, she seemed to have a joyful aura about her. I had no doubt that if she’d had a tail, it would be wagging up a storm right about now. It was adorable, how intent she was on eating the confection in front of her.

“Ah, this pastry is truly delicious. And the giba dish from before was also fantastic. It’s clear that you really do have some superbly talented chefs at the forest’s edge,” Luidross said.

“The three we brought here today are all exceptionally skilled, even at the forest’s edge. I was the one who taught them, but they each had a passion and a talent for cooking before that.”

“And what’s more, the hunters of the forest’s edge are also extraordinary swordsmen. We should thank the western god in every way we can for giving us the opportunity to welcome such a remarkable group of people as citizens of Genos,” Eulifia said with a relaxed smile, looking over those present. “Before we became acquainted last year, the people of the forest’s edge were like characters in a myth to me. But that was only natural, as I had never seen even a single one of you. Though you are fellow residents of this land, you felt more distant than the citizens of Sym and Jagar. I’m sure it was the same for all of you as well...”

“Indeed. Though we often saw people from Sym or Jagar around the post town, we never so much as laid eyes on a noble. The only one permitted to do so was the leading clan head of the forest’s edge, and prior to Cyclaeus’s downfall, even he was never invited to the castle town,” Jiza Ruu replied while scooping up some of Toor Deen’s dessert with a spoon.

In response, Eulifia’s smile grew even more amused. “We live within our stone walls, while you live surrounded by trees. Our god is the western god,

whereas you worship the forest. Though we recognize one another as comrades, it would be difficult to argue that we live with the same will in our hearts... And yet, I am overjoyed to be able to talk to you like this up close. Even my daughter is happier for having met all of you.”

Odifia had finished her sweet the fastest out of everyone, and was staring at her empty plate with a forlorn expression.

Eulifia daintily wiped her daughter’s mouth before giving the young girl half of what remained of her dessert, and then she then once again raised her head.

“No matter how long it may take, I wish to form a proper connection with all of you. Leeheim might have been wrong in his methods, but he has shown that he is remorseful and that he wants to use his regrets to guide him forward. Polarth, who has been entrusted with handling so much by the house of Daleim; Torst, the guardian of Countess Turan; and Duke Genos himself... They all have a lot more they need to learn about you people of the forest’s edge. That is my opinion on the matter.”

“And I believe we should try to understand the ruling nobles of Genos more deeply as well...” Jiza Ruu very calmly replied. Sufira Zaza had yet to say a single word, but she was watching the two of them quite intently.

It wasn’t as if all the doubts and misunderstandings between us had been cleared away just like that. Leeheim kept looking at Reina Ruu listlessly, while Leiriss was glaring at Shin Ruu with fierce eyes full of spirit and a desire to fight the young hunter. For their part, Reina and Shin Ruu were simply being careful not to meet the two nobles’ gazes while they enjoyed their desserts.

I also didn’t know how much Luidross agreed with Eulifia’s and Jiza Ruu’s words. Honestly, he just looked relieved that the immediate problem before him seemed to have been resolved without any serious issues. Ai Fa and Ludo Ruu were just being their normal selves, while Toor Deen wasn’t old enough to fully understand the complexities of our relationship with the nobles—not that she needed to, since she wasn’t in a position of leadership anyway.

Even so, I felt more than a little satisfied, myself. At the previous banquet, Ama Min Rutim had seemed to see a real reason for hope in how the nobles had enthusiastically eaten our giba cooking, and today, the people of the

forest's edge had been greeted with kindness and consideration by the residents of the castle town.

It wasn't as if Jiza Ruu and the others had been completely satisfied with their cooking without any reservations at all, but Luidross had truly wished to please the people of the forest's edge, and Roy and Shilly Rou had done a great job of fulfilling that request. Maybe you could say that we still weren't communicating as smoothly as we did when we held banquets at the Daleim lands or the forest's edge, but this dinner did seem like it had been a strong first step toward forming a proper bond with them.

I didn't think there was any need to rush. After all, the people of the forest's edge and the nobles of Genos had spent eighty years tumbling down the wrong path with constant friction between the two groups. But if we just kept moving forward one step at a time as we searched for the right path to take, we would someday be able to smile at each other from the bottom of our hearts and join hands. That was what I felt when I saw Polarth smiling happily, Odifia intently eating her dessert, and Melfried resolutely listening to Jiza Ruu and Eulifia's words.

After that, we all chatted with each other for a while longer, until the peace banquet with the house of Saturas wound down and came to an amicable end.

Chapter 4: The Welcome Banquet

1

It was now the following day, the tenth of the silver month—the day when we would be inviting the townsfolk to the forest’s edge for a banquet.

Prep work on the food began at the Ruu settlement when the sun hit its peak, but it was business as usual for us as we had headed to the post town. The lingering aftereffects of the revival festival had finally faded away, so we had only prepared eight hundred servings for today.

We also went back to operating the same number of stalls that we’d previously had before the revival festival, and the spaces we were now using were a good bit further to the south from where we’d previously been set up. The Gamley Troupe had taken their tent down three days ago, so there was a large vacant lot across the street from us and a little to the north.

Everything was running very smoothly. Securing enough personnel for five stalls was no problem, so we planned to keep things like this for the time being. The stall I was in charge of was, of course, the one that served the daily specials, which were constantly changing. It was also the one where we sold any new dishes we wanted to try.

Nothing had changed about the outdoor restaurant so far. However, today was the last day that it would include the section that had a canopy but no furniture. We had rented that space twenty days ago on the day of dawn, the twenty-second of the violet month, which meant that this was the end of our second rental contract for it. As such, we had decided to take tomorrow off.

Since the post town had finally calmed down again, we no longer needed to bring guards along, so it was just us thirteen chefs and Sufira Zaza here. All of the hunters under the Ruu had returned to their work in the forest, while Ai Fa was at home training to regain her strength. It had taken quite a while, but it really felt like life was going back to normal now.

“I’m a newcomer, so this job has only been part of my life for half a month or so now. I still feel like if I take things lightly, I’ll quickly find myself getting overwhelmed by it all,” Fei Beim said after we had sold everything and started cleaning up. The Beim clan was the most recent to have decided to assist me, though the Gaaz and Ratsu had been at this for less than a month as well. She still hadn’t fully overcome her issues with the townsfolk, but if she could do that, I wouldn’t have any problems with her performance at this point.

As planned, the smaller clans were sending people to work for us on a rotating schedule. For the Fa clan stalls, I was borrowing the help of three women at a time from among the Beim, Dagora, Gaaz, and Ratsu, while the Ruu stalls had two women joining them from the Lea, Min, and Muufa. Until the flow of customers changed again with the arrival of the rainy season, we intended to stick with this system.

“You aren’t joining us at today’s banquet, right, Fei Beim? That’s a bit of a shame,” I said, only to be met with her usual displeased glare.

“Normally, taking part in another clan’s banquet isn’t something you can just casually do. Even more so when talking about one of the leading clans. The Sudra and Deen are actually considered to be quite eccentric for allowing it.”

“Yeah, I remember Yun Sudra and Toor Deen weren’t allowed to participate in the Ruu festival of the hunt before, but they *were* permitted to stay at the Sauti settlement for that whole thing with the lord of the forest. I guess that’s just the kind of thing that ends up happening when you get involved with the Fa clan.”

Fei Beim offered no response.

“And I want to keep working on building that kind of relationship with the Beim and Dagora too.”

“The way you phrased that, you made it sound like you’re trying to lure us down a bad path,” Fei Beim retorted, turning away in a huff. She could be rather bad-tempered, so just being able to chat with her like this felt like major progress.

It was then that some figures approached from the north: Mikel and Myme, who we had planned to meet here.

“Sorry for the wait. We’re very grateful for your invite today, Asuta,” Myme said.

“Hey there. Actually, you should be saying that to the members of the Ruu clan instead.”

“Ah, my apologies! We’re in your debt, Lala and Sheera Ruu!”

Those two were in charge of the Ruu stalls today. Ama Min Rutim also gave our guests a friendly greeting, while Yamiru Lea and Tsuvai pretended not to notice and kept on cleaning up.

“We’re meeting with Yumi and everyone else at The Kimyuus’s Tail, right? Should we head over there now?”

“Oh, hold on just a moment. Sorry, we’re still waiting for some people to show up here, and I’d like for us all to go together if possible.”

“Is that so? But Tara and her family are going in their own wagon, aren’t they?”

“Yes, since they’re apparently bringing a big crowd. I’m talking about a pair of new guests... Ah, is that them?” The highway was quite lively here in the early afternoon, but they still really stuck out. They were a man and woman who were clearly westerners from their stature, but they were wearing hoods that heavily shadowed their faces like easterners did. “Welcome. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Thanks,” one replied with a nod, pulling back his hood and turning toward Mikel, who furrowed his brow, looking puzzled. “It’s been some time. Do you remember me, Mikel?”

“It hasn’t been all that long since we last saw one another. I’m not senile enough to have forgotten already.”

Roy gave an awkward chuckle in response to Mikel’s unfriendly words. And then his smaller companion pushed past him and stepped forward.

“This is our first time meeting, but you *are* the Mikel who was once the head chef at The Maiden in White, correct? I am an apprentice of Varkas, the owner of The Silver Star, and my name is Shilly Rou.”

Mikel seemed to be growing even more displeased as he looked her up and down with a glare. “If you greet me dressed like that, I’ll never be able to pick you out the next time we meet.”

“Ah, m-my apologies. I have issues with such filthy places...so allow me to reintroduce myself later.”

Once again, Shilly Rou was hiding the lower half of her face under some sort of shawl, and with the hood she had on as well, there was no way anyone could see what her face actually looked like. Nonetheless, Myme’s eyes were sparkling as she stared up at Shilly Rou and moved closer to her.

“You’re one of Varkas’s apprentices? What are you doing in a place like this?”

“Well, you see, various things happened that led to us being here...” Shilly Rou replied rather respectfully, but her tone was as firm as usual. In the end, they had told Jiza Ruu yesterday as we were leaving that they wanted to participate in the Ruu clan’s banquet, and he had granted them permission to do so.

Perhaps Shilly Rou had ultimately reached the conclusion that she couldn’t disregard the chefs of the forest’s edge after all, or perhaps Sheera Ruu’s earnest words had moved her. Or perhaps she just got caught up in Roy’s passion... I had no way to know for sure, but regardless of the reason behind it, it felt like quite an achievement to have two residents of the castle town wanting to visit the settlement at the forest’s edge.

“Okay, let’s head out.”

Along with our four guests, we set out for The Kimyuus’s Tail.

Yumi and Telia Mas were waiting for us there, and so was Jidura, who had been brought from the settlement with its wagon to meet us. The three wagons we had come to town in wouldn’t be enough for fourteen people of the forest’s edge plus six guests.

“Hey there. Whoever wants to hop in, go ahead and feel free to.” Barthia was the one holding Jidura’s reins, and she was dressed like a warrior. After thinking for a bit, I had Mikel, Myme, Roy, and Shilly Rou get in. Myme got along with Barthia well, and I got the sense that the pair from the castle town would prefer

to travel with her and Mikel.

I took the reins of Gilulu's wagon, and had Toor Deen and Yun Sudra ride with me—since they would be sticking around for the banquet—as well as Yumi and Telia Mas. Everyone else split up among Ruuruu and Fafa's wagons, and then we were off.

We arrived at the Ruu settlement at roughly half past the lower second hour. There were still four whole hours left till sunset, so we had returned right on schedule.

The settlement was already bustling with women getting things ready for the banquet. Simple stone stoves had been constructed here and there throughout the plaza and foundations for bonfires had been set up, so things were looking pretty good. The biggest difference from an ordinary banquet was the fact that a wooden stage hadn't been erected.

"Well then, please excuse us. We should gather at the Fa house tomorrow like we usually would, at the midpoint between when the sun hits its peak and when it sets, correct?"

"Yeah, see you then."

Fei Beim's group of three women then departed to return to their own houses in Fafa's wagon.

It was then that a pathetic shriek of "Aah!" sounded out. If I wasn't mistaken, that voice belonged to a certain chef from the castle town.

"What's the matter, Shilly Rou?" I asked, leaving the wagon where it stood for the moment and heading toward the source of that voice.

There was no longer space in the plaza for our wagons, so we had all come to a stop off to the side of the road. Shilly Rou had disembarked there, but she was currently collapsed on the ground.

Standing right in front of her was a little guy in a strange leather mask who had long, burly arms like an orangutan: Zan of the Gamley Troupe. He bowed to Shilly Rou, and silently returned to their wagon.

"What in the world happened?" the massive Doga asked, leaning out of the

same wagon and sending Shilly Rou into even more of a panic. Roy was standing there next to her, also staring at Doga with a look of astonishment.

“Ah, sorry about that. These guests are new to the Ruu settlement and it’s their first time seeing you all, so I guess they were a little surprised,” I said.

“Oh, I see...” Doga replied, looking a bit hesitant, but a moment later, he stepped out of the wagon, revealing his half-naked figure that was well over two meters tall. Shilly Rou was outright trembling and clinging to Roy’s legs. “Sorry for surprising you. We’re merely traveling performers. Though we may be lowborn folks without even houses to call our own, I hope you understand that we would never act unlawfully toward anyone from town...”

“T-Traveling performers? Why are people like you here in the settlement at the forest’s edge?” Shilly Rou asked.

“We have our reasons for being here. My apologies for offending you,” Doga stated in a low, rumbling voice before going back into their wagon. Shilly Rou and Roy still hadn’t pulled themselves together, so I gave them an apologetic bow.

“Sorry about that. I forgot to mention they were here before. But they aren’t dangerous in the least, so please don’t worry about them.”

“Hmm. You sure do have some interesting people staying here at the forest’s edge. That’s the first time I’ve ever seen someone so ridiculously huge, almost like a northerner,” Roy said while wiping away a cold sweat.

And then, a voice called out from the settlement, “What happened?” It was Reina Ruu, who had stayed here for today. She must have come running after hearing Shilly Rou’s shriek.

“Ah, Reina Ruu. It’s nothing. We just had a bit of a run-in with the troupe members.”

“I see,” Reina Ruu replied as she stared at Roy and Shilly Rou, the latter still clinging to the former’s legs. “Welcome to the Ruu settlement. The banquet will begin with the setting of the sun, but as you seem to have an interest in our cooking, please feel free to observe our work.”

“Right. Sorry for barging in on you while you’re so busy,” Roy replied.

Rather than reply to that statement, Reina Ruu brusquely turned away and started walking back to the plaza. Meanwhile, Shilly Rou was finally able to get back to her feet while holding a hand over her heart.

“Are you all right? Those guys really aren’t as scary as they look. And they have these amazing performances too!” Myme remarked with a smile from a short distance away.

Shilly Rou awkwardly adjusted the collar on her cloak, then shot me a glare. “That was quite a pathetic display on my part. But anyone would be shocked to suddenly encounter people like them.”

“Hmph. My legs didn’t give out from fear, though,” Roy teased.

“That’s not what happened to me either!” Shilly Rou angrily shot back. Though her position was higher than Roy’s, it wasn’t as if they were officially coworkers, and Roy was also older, so they seemed to have a pretty casual relationship.

“Will those people be participating in today’s banquet as well?” Shilly Rou asked rather nervously.

As she detached Ruuruu from its wagon, Sheera Ruu replied, “No. While they are also our guests, their reason for being here has nothing to do with deepening any sort of relationship with us, so they aren’t planning on attending.”

“I see. That’s a bit of a shame, seeing as how they’re already here.” Naturally, I had been the one to say that, not Shilly Rou.

“I agree,” Sheera Ruu replied with a kind smile.

I figured that meant the group as a whole hadn’t managed to earn Donda Ruu’s trust yet. Maybe things could have been different if their leader, Gamley, weren’t such a questionable fellow.

“Well then, allow me to show you around. Please, come this way.”

Under Sheera Ruu’s guidance, we finally set foot in the Ruu settlement.

As Yumi looked around at the women and young children hard at work, she remarked, “Wow. This is really something. You’ve got things ready for a big fire

too! We've got a lot to look forward to when the sun sets!"

"It seems like Dora and his family still aren't here yet. What would you like to do in the meantime?" I asked.

"Oh, you can just let me go off on my own. I think I'd like to have a bit of a look around. Why don't you focus on your new guests?" Yumi stated, and then she leaned in close to Shilly Rou. "Hey, isn't it way too hot to be dressed up like you're from Sym? And it's a bit rude to hide your face when you're visiting someone else's house, don't you think?"

When we had met up, I had only explained that Shilly Rou and Roy were chefs from the castle town. Since this was pretty much the first time Yumi had met people who lived behind those stone walls, she had been openly curious and cautious toward them right from the start.

Shilly Rou looked a touch annoyed at Yumi's rather combative statement. But after a moment, she threw her hood off rather forcefully, and then also pulled the fabric over her mouth down to her chest.

She was wearing her dark-brown hair up, and there was a strong gleam in the eighteen-year-old girl's reddish-brown eyes. From what I could recall, Yumi was a year younger than her. And yet, the girl from the post town was both taller and had a figure second only to Vina Ruu's, so she certainly didn't *look* younger.

"Hmm. You've got a pretty face. You're so weirdly hostile that I figured you'd be a lot less cute."

"I have no interest in hearing someone I'm meeting for the first time comment on my appearance."

"Hey, you're the one acting all belligerent. This banquet is supposed to be fun, you know." And then Yumi suddenly did something truly unbelievable: she reached out toward Shilly Rou's face and pulled her cheeks up on both sides. "Come on, smile. Show us at least a little charm."

"That hurts! What do you think you're doing?!"

"I'm telling you, you won't be able to enjoy the banquet if you keep frowning like that. Anyway, I'll see you later." With a big grin that showed off the whites of her teeth, Yumi grabbed Telia Mas's hand and cleared out.

“Wh-What is with that woman? Acting so rough out of nowhere!”

“Well, she was probably trying to lighten the tension in the air, in her own unique way. But despite what you might think, she really is a good person at her core.”

Shilly Rou had her hands up against her red cheeks and was tearing up a bit. She had probably never been treated like that before back in the castle town. I was actually getting a little worried about her, and how she might react to all this culture shock.

“Well then, let’s start with some introductions at the main house. You two still need to receive official permission to stay here at the settlement, after all,” Sheera Ruu said, and we started walking through the plaza.

Lala Ruu had remained silent so far—she didn’t seem all that interested in Roy and Shilly Rou’s visit. That was why Sheera Ruu was acting as our guide instead. Had Lala Ruu been told the details of what had happened yesterday in the castle town? That was something I couldn’t help but wonder about, but I hadn’t had an opportunity to bring it up.

“Mia Lea Ruu should be in the kitchen. Please, come this way.”

We said our farewells to Ama Min Rutim and Yamiru Lea along the way so they could help the others with their work, leaving us with Sheera and Lala Ruu, me, Toor Deen, Yun Sudra, and our four guests, making for a group of nine.

We tied the three tolos to some trees behind the house, then headed over to the kitchen. Just as Sheera Ruu had predicted, we indeed found Mia Lea Ruu there, working with Reina Ruu and Granny Tito Min.

“Ah, welcome back, Lala. And everyone else too. And of course, welcome to the Ruu house, dear guests.” Mia Lea Ruu was wearing her usual bighearted smile. The women of the branch houses and subordinate clans gathered there were staring at Roy and Shilly Rou with great curiosity, as this was their first time seeing those two.

“My name is Mia Lea Ruu, and I’m in charge of the women of the Ruu clan. Would you mind telling me your names?”

“I’m Roy, a resident of the Genos castle town.”

“And my name is Shilly Rou.”

“Ah, yes. My family thanks you for yesterday. Even my stubborn eldest son was quite impressed with the meal you prepared.”

Roy scratched his head, seemingly trying to decide what attitude to take. “I’m just a cooking assistant. Shilly Rou here was in charge of the kitchen. But anyway, I’m just really grateful that our request was accepted on such short notice.”

“Yes, well, there aren’t many townsfolk out there who are interested in visiting the settlement. I hope you enjoy yourselves, just like our other guests,” Mia Lea Ruu said with an even brighter smile. “This is your first time coming to the settlement at the forest’s edge, correct? So, what is your impression?”

“I was surprised by how it really is right in the middle of the forest... Still, you seem to have quite a fine kitchen here,” Roy replied, seemingly already impressed with the interior of the kitchen. Picking up on that, Mia Lea Ruu smiled and stepped aside from the entrance.

“I’ve heard that you’re interested in the work of our chefs. It’s nothing all that special, but please go ahead and observe as much as you like.”

The people in the kitchen seemed to be mainly working on making soup at the moment. All five of the stoves inside had large pots on them, giving off white steam and smoke. They must have been in the middle of boiling meat and vegetables, and making stock.

“Here is where we cut meat to be used later. They’re only doing the initial preparations now, so that probably won’t be interesting to you,” Reina Ruu stated in a stiffer tone than usual.

“I disagree,” Roy shot back. “Those initial preparations are the most important step in cooking. You should be well aware of that by now, right?”

Reina Ruu said nothing in response.

“I can tell you’ve got a firm foundation, even when it comes to how you cut your meat. Did you instruct them on that, Asuta?”

“Yes. I taught the members of the main house, and then they spread those

lessons to the members of the branch houses and the subordinate clans.”

There were women present who I didn’t really recognize, so they must have been members of the subordinate clans here for the banquet. From what I’d been told, there would be a little more than twenty men and women from the subordinate clans gathered here today.

“Would you mind if I take a quick look at that knife? Hmm, it seems to be rather cheap, but it’s been sharpened very well,” Roy commented after taking a carving knife down off the wall. It was true that nobody except me purchased expensive cooking knives here at the forest’s edge, but at the same time, blades were essential tools for the hunters, so they were quite thorough in caring for them.

For a while after that, the pair from the castle town just silently watched the women as they worked. They cut meat, put firewood into the stoves, added water, and scooped away scum... All very ordinary preparations. However, Roy and Shilly Rou had terribly serious looks in their eyes as they observed the proceedings.

“Are you really enjoying yourselves, just watching like that?” Mia Lea Ruu eventually asked with a smile.

“Yeah,” Roy replied with a nod. “Though I wouldn’t quite say it’s a matter of enjoyment. More like it’s exceptionally interesting.”

“Well, as long as you’re okay with this... Ah, Reina, isn’t it about time to start the other preparations?”

“Yeah, you’re right. Okay, I’m off.”

Reina Ruu tried to slip past Roy, only for him to ask, “Where are you going?”

“It’s time to get to work on the whole roast giba in the plaza, so I’m going to go explain to the others how it’s done.”

“Oh? If it’s possible, I’d like to see that as well.”

And so, we all ended up moving again as a crowd.

As we exited the kitchen, we saw some women bringing a pair of giba out from one of the other houses. There was wood piled high in the center of the

plaza for the ceremonial flame, and simple stoves were set up on either side to roast the giba.

“So, that’s a giba? It’s pretty small.”

“Those are young giba.”

Even so, they still looked like they weighed around forty kilos, even with the innards removed. Their pelts hadn’t been removed—only their fur had been burnt off— while their stomachs were packed with vegetables. The two young giba had been pierced with skewers, straight through from their mouths to their rears, and just a few moments later they were suspended over the stoves.

“If you’re only starting to roast them now, they’re not gonna be ready by sunset, are they?” I asked.

“That’s right,” Sheera Ruu, not Reina Ruu, said with a nod. “If we start out by offering people these whole roast giba, everyone will swarm around them at once trying to get some, so our plan is to serve them up sometime after the start of the banquet. In which case, it would be ideal for them to not be ready until the other dishes have had a chance to make their way around a bit, right?”

“Wow. You planned things out in that much detail? That’s kind of amazing.”

“Reina Ruu is the one who came up with the idea.”

Reina Ruu herself was currently instructing a woman from the branch houses on how to maintain the flame at the proper level. With Roy and Shilly Rou both present, she had seemed rather tense for a while now.

“Still, you captured two young giba? But you weren’t able to hand either of them over to the Gamley Troupe unharmed?”

“That’s right. Even these giba were too old for them, apparently.”

“Huh? They’re looking to capture a live giba even younger than this? I’ve never even seen one that young, let alone one that’s been captured alive.”

“That’s true. Their goal seems awfully difficult.”

“What are you talking about?” Roy interjected.

“Ah, those traveling performers from before are staying here at the Ruu

settlement because they're hoping to capture a young giba. Several of them have been going out into the forest with the hunters in order to do that."

"They're trying to capture a live giba? To raise as livestock, like karon?"

"No. They're performers, so they want to train a giba to do tricks. Or if that proves to be impossible, they could still show it off as an exotic animal."

"That's a shame. Giba are an extremely high-quality ingredient. If someone could manage to raise and sell them, that might end up being even more profitable than hunting them, right?"

Reina Ruu immediately shot back with, "We hunt giba in order to live here in the forest. And besides, they're dangerous beasts who ravage crops, so I can't imagine how humans could ever raise them."

"Oh? But karon were wild beasts to begin with too. I don't know if they ever made a mess of people's crops, but they were seen as dangerous animals who could easily kill a human with their horns. In fact, there are supposedly still wild karon running around somewhere out there on the continent."

Reina Ruu's eyes shot open wide in shock.

"You guys visited a karon ranch, right? The karon of Dabagg don't have any horns, but that's because they were made that way by pairing ones with small horns together. Supposedly, some are still occasionally born with the ability to grow horns, but they're broken off when the animals are young."

"Then, you're saying it would be possible to make docile giba with no horns and tusks...?"

"Well, it takes years, decades even, to do something like that. But if the time ever comes when there aren't enough giba around, that would be one way to increase their numbers."

"The forest of Morga is vast, so I can't imagine it would ever be possible to hunt too many giba. And besides...if such giba were raised by humans, I believe that would make them an entirely different animal from the giba we know."

The people of the forest's edge saw giba as being children of the forest, just like themselves, so it would likely be difficult for them to accept the idea of

raising them as livestock.

Seeing Reina Ruu's troubled expression, Roy scratched his head. "I was just saying whatever came to mind. You don't need to take it so seriously," he said.

"I wasn't taking it seriously at all," Reina Ruu shot back, once again turning away in a huff. It seemed Roy really was able to throw her out of sorts quite easily.

All the while, Shilly Rou had been watching the giba as it was steadily roasted, and now she bluntly interjected, "Excuse me, but there doesn't seem to be anything more to see here. If you don't mind, could we observe another kitchen?"

"Very well. Why don't we head to my house, in that case? Rimee Ruu should have already gotten started baking sweets there," Sheera Ruu answered with a smile, only for shrill shriek to erupt from elsewhere in the plaza.

When we turned to look, we froze in surprise. Shilly Rou shrieked even louder than the woman from before, and started clinging to Roy once again.

There, at the entrance to the settlement, we saw a trio of beasts who were supposed to be out in the forest: an algura silver lion, a gaaje leopard, and a black vamda ape. For any of the women who came from the Ruu's subordinate clans, this would have been the first time they had ever seen such creatures.

However, that wasn't the only reason for their shock. After all, the most terrifying of those beasts, the black ape, was carrying a bloody person over its shoulder, and even from our position at the center of the plaza, it was immediately clear that he was a hunter of the forest's edge.

"It's fine! You have nothing to fear! Someone, please hurry and prepare to treat our wounded!" another hunter loudly called out, appearing from behind the beasts. As soon as Lala Ruu was able to recognize him as Shin Ruu, she took off running toward them without saying a word.

"I'm going to head over too. You two, please look after our guests," I told Reina and Sheera Ruu before hurrying after Lala Ruu.

All the while, more and more figures were streaming into the plaza. They included the four from the Gamley Troupe and Mida, who was carrying another

injured hunter, just like the black ape.

“Shin Ruu, are you all right?!” Lala Ruu shouted out, leaping toward him with all the momentum of her run.

Shin Ruu looked a little taken aback, but he nodded to her. “Yes. Two men from the branch houses were injured. However, they should be able to return to the forest within a few days...thanks to these guys saving us when we were in a real pinch.”

“I’m just glad we were able to be of some assistance to you, even if it was only in the very end,” Pino replied.

The hunters that the black ape and Mida carried were moaning in agony, but the other members of the group looked uninjured. Rolo had a listless smile on her face, despite her hair being filthy and disheveled, and Zetta was hiding his appearance under a hooded cloak, though I could still see his beastly golden eyes blazing underneath it.

And then there was Shantu, who was holding an incredibly tiny giba up against his chest. I had never seen one so small. It looked to be only around thirty centimeters long, little enough that I had to wonder if it was a newborn.



“After we helped those folks over there, we were on our way back to the settlement, when we spotted this giba coming down the river. It must have gotten separated from its mother and fallen in. We were able to get ahold of a baby giba without having to tear it away from its parents. It was just the kind of blessing we were hoping for...” Shantu said with a smile as he lovingly held the tiny beast.

The Gamley Troupe had managed to accomplish their goal, which meant that today would be their final day in Genos before their departure.

2

Around when the sun was setting to the west and the light from the bonfires was becoming more and more essential, the welcome banquet kicked off.

No stage had been built today, so Donda Ruu instead simply stood in front of the main house, facing his comrades. There were just under forty people present from the Ruu clan alone, as well as twenty members of their subordinate clans, which added up to a pretty significant crowd. The twelve guests were lined up on either side of him.

We had Yumi and Telia Mas from the post town, Mikel and Myme from the Turan lands, Roy and Shilly Rou from the castle town, and the members of Dora’s household from the Daleim lands. In the end, everyone from Dora’s family had come aside from the two old folks. That meant Dora himself, Tara and her two older brothers, and the wives of Dora and the elder son, making six in total.

Unsurprisingly, the four who were visiting for the first time were standing there motionlessly and looking quite tense. Though they had grown acquainted with the members of the Ruu and enjoyed a feast together back during the revival festival, there was a big difference between hosting and visiting. In order to alleviate some of their nervousness, we had arranged to have some familiar faces like Rimee Ruu and myself at the front of the crowd.

“Though we people of the forest’s edge have lived here in the forest of Morga for eighty long years now, we have avoided forming any ties with the townsfolk

for most of that time. It is my belief that our approach was in some ways correct and in some ways incorrect. Carelessly allowing ourselves to grow too close to outsiders could have led to us straying from our proper path and casting away our pride. That was why our ancestors distanced themselves from the townsfolk, and even now, I will not say that those who doubt our current course are wrong.” Donda Ruu’s voice resounded clearly through the dimly lit plaza. “However, we did eventually start connecting with the townsfolk, and had we not done so, the crimes of the Suun and the nobles would never have been properly judged. It was thanks to these new bonds, and the time we spent listening to the townsfolk and learning about how they live, that we were able to learn the full extent of the Suun clan’s wrongdoing, as well as our own mistakes. That last point in particular is what gives me the most confidence that this is the proper path forward for us.”

Not a single one of his sixty comrades so much as coughed. Even the young children simply clung to their mothers or siblings and quietly listened to the leading clan head’s words.

“We have chosen the proper direction, but in order to stay on this path, I believe it is important that we keep learning more about what kind of people the townsfolk and the nobles truly are. That is why I decided to hold this banquet and invited these guests here to the settlement, in the hope that by gathering in the same place and eating the same food, we may share in the same joy. To the bonds between the forest’s edge and Genos!”

“To the bonds between the forest’s edge and Genos!” a chorus of voices chanted back in turn. Most of those voices had practically been bellowing, though, which startled the majority of our guests.

Still, after that toast was held with numerous bottles of fruit wine thrust up into the air, things loosened up considerably. Most people started moving over to the food being kept warm atop the stoves, while several of the women rushed over toward the guests. Rimee Ruu, Ai Fa, and I started by approaching Dora’s family.

“Come on, it’s a banquet. You should enjoy the food everyone prepared.”

“R-Right. It’s just, they sure are enthusiastic,” Dora replied. He was practically

a regular at this point, but even he had been completely awed by how lively a forest's edge banquet could be.

Dan Rutim then strode over to us. "What are you doing, huddling up over here, Dora?! I want to introduce you to my daughter, since she's here today! We've got a mat laid out, so why don't you all join us?!"

Mats had been laid down here and there like usual so that everyone could sit down and enjoy the food, and it seemed that the members of the Rutim clan had already gathered around one of them. Dora's family was already acquainted with Gazraan and Ama Min Rutim, and Morun Rutim was a pretty amiable person, so I was sure that arrangement would work out just fine.

Looking around, I saw that Yumi and Telia Mas were already gathered around a pot with some women from the Ruu branch houses. Apparently, they had already become friends during the day. Yun Sudra and Toor Deen were over with Mikel and Myme, and Mia Lea Ruu had joined them as well, so it seemed that almost everyone had found a group to join without any problems.

That just left, unsurprisingly, Roy and Shilly Rou. Rimee Ruu had headed over to the Rutim group with Tara, hand in hand, so it was up to Ai Fa and I to guide our final two guests.

"Are you doing all right? If you want, you two can stick with us."

"Yeah, this is one heck of a commotion. It's almost as if the revival festival suddenly returned," Roy replied, crossing his arms with a meek expression on his face. Meanwhile, Shilly Rou had shrunk back a bit next to him. Looking closely, I saw that she was actually gripping the hem of Roy's outfit. Well, in a place like this, he was the only one she could depend on.

"Nobody here would be rude to a guest, even after drinking, so you have nothing to worry about. Hmm...? What is it, Ai Fa?"

"Well, as this is their first time coming to the Ruu settlement and they wish to participate in the banquet, I was thinking perhaps they should greet the elder, Granny Jiba."

"Oh, good idea. In that case, why don't we start with that?"

And so, we headed toward the mat laid out in the center of the plaza, where

there was a ritual flame that reminded me of a campfire, with a cloth mat laid out in front of it. Granny Jiba was seated there slurping soup, surrounded by Granny Tito Min and the husband and wife pair of Tari and Ryada Ruu.

“It’s been a while, Jiba Ruu. We brought along some guests from the castle town.”

“Yes, I heard from Jiza and Ludo... I hear you treated my family to some rather fine food yesterday,” Granny Jiba replied, her wrinkled face breaking out in a smile. Roy looked a bit bewildered, but even so, he gave a polite bow.

“My name is Roy, and she’s Shilly Rou. It was the house of Saturas who hosted your family, and Shilly Rou here who cooked the food. I just assisted her with her work.”

“Hmm... But you cooked it with our people in mind, correct? Ludo was so excited, saying he had never eaten such wonderful food in the castle town before...”

“It’s a chef’s job to please those who eat their food. We simply did what we were supposed to.”

“I see... Then please, go ahead and enjoy the cooking prepared by my people here today... Everyone’s been working so hard so that you and all of our other guests would be happy...”

With that greeting done, we stepped away, and then Roy gave a big sigh.

“That little old lady was shockingly intense.”

“You think so? That’s the first time I’ve heard anyone say that.”

Still, I could see how their first encounter with Granny Jiba might have made her seem to have something of a divine aura, with the way she was smiling at them with the ritual flame behind her. The impression she was giving off felt very different from how she looked when she had sat around the dinner table with Dora’s family.

Then again, Roy and Shilly Rou were residents of the castle town, and you could easily tell just by looking at them. Their way of thinking was probably closer to mine—as I had been raised in Japan—than to that of the citizens of

the Daleim lands or the post town.

Thanks to the bonfires, the plaza was bright, but we were surrounded by the dark nighttime forest. The black shadows of the trees were all around us, and to the east stood the massive Mount Morga, towering high. There was dirt beneath our feet, cool nighttime air tickling our cheeks, and heat coming off the lively crowd... It was the sort of rustic banquet atmosphere that you could never experience within the stone walls.

The people of the forest's edge were always brimming with energy, so none of them hesitated in the least to shout out as they chowed down on giba meat. It was a sight I had grown totally accustomed to seeing, but it really was dazzling to look at, like something out of a folktale.

"Ah, Asuta and Ai Fa! What are you doing, just standing there," a voice called out from off to our side, and when I turned to look, I found Rau Lea and Giran Ririn standing there—two heads of clans under the Ruu with very different ages. Rau Lea was the one speaking. "So those are the chefs from the castle town? Hmm. They're awfully spindly and weak-looking."

"Just coming out and saying that first thing? We chefs don't need any more strength than it takes to carry a pot, anyway," Roy countered.

"That's why I figured it wouldn't be rude to mention it. And this is a banquet, so don't be so stiff when you talk!" Rau Lea said with a cheerful laugh as he looked over Roy and Shilly Rou. It seemed he had already been drinking. Shilly Rou hid behind Roy, as if she were a girl in town getting hassled by some thug.

"Have you gotten a chance to enjoy any of the food the women kindly prepared? The dishes all look delicious," Giran Ririn chimed in, wearing the same kind smile as always. Unlike most hunters of the forest's edge, he never seemed to give off their characteristically intense aura in the least.

"Right, let's get some food. Er, where should we go first?"

"If you haven't had anything yet, then you should start with that pot over there! Even the folks from town seemed to really enjoy it!" Rau Lea said.

With that, we started walking toward the stove he had suggested, where we found Myme's group. Mikel, Toor Deen, and Yun Sudra were all still there, while

Mia Lea Ruu had disappeared, but Tsvai and Yamiru Lea had popped up in her place. They were eating a soup that looked like it had been made with karon milk.

“Oh, Asuta! This dish is really delicious!” Myme called out with a bright smile.

Her words seemed to stir something in Shilly Rou, as she finally stepped back out from behind Roy. “This is a karon milk soup dish, correct? It doesn’t appear to contain any herbs or the like.”

“Yes, but it’s wonderful even so.”

As she watched the two of them out of the corner of her eye, Yamiru Lea silently ladled out some soup for us. Tsvai, meanwhile, just feigned indifference.

“Ah, thanks... Hmm, they used meatballs?” I accepted a helping for myself after Roy and Shilly Rou got theirs, and I definitely saw some little meatballs in it. The stock had been made from shoulder and thigh meat, naturally, and the mellow aroma of karon milk, which was becoming more and more common at the forest’s edge, filled my nose.

“The vegetables used are tino, nenon...and aria, I believe? You people of the forest’s edge sure do love aria,” Roy noted.

“It’s not just here at the forest’s edge. Aria is the most commonly used vegetable in the post town and the Daleim lands as well. After all, they’re cheap and packed with nutrients,” I replied.

“Hmm. Aria don’t see much use in the castle town... Are they what gives your soup dishes such depth?”

“I think it plays a big role, yeah. I use aria in lots of dishes, even if I just want it as a potherb.”

Then Shilly Rou suddenly injected herself into the conversation between Roy and me, sounding deadly serious. “I said there weren’t any herbs in this before, but it does seem to contain pico leaves. As I recall, you all tend to use those quite frequently as well.”

“Right. I might have explained this to you before, but giba meat is preserved

by pickling it in pico leaves rather than salt here at the forest's edge. You can get as many as you need out in the forest, after all."

"I see," Shilly Rou replied with a nod, steadily consuming the soup one careful bite at a time.

Rau Lea knitted his brow and leaned in close to us. "You guys sure do look serious when you're eating. Do you not like it or something?"

Shilly Rou ducked her head and shrank away from him. Apparently, the fierce aura around Rau Lea had overwhelmed her. Roy also took a step forward as if to hide her from him.

"Not at all. It's just that we're chefs from the castle town, so when we eat food, we also study it."

"Hmm... So, is it good or bad, then? It was one of my clan members who was nice enough to make this soup for you, after all."

"It's not as if I made it all by myself from scratch, you drunkard of a clan head," Yamiru Lea interrupted in her usual tone, but Rau Lea's attention remained fixed on our two guests. He probably didn't mean to be intimidating, but the young clan head's gaze always had this piercing quality to it, like that of a hunting dog.

Roy stopped and thought for a bit before answering, "If you ask me, I'd have to say that it's good. I think you'd probably want to add several kinds of herbs and the like to it before trying to sell it in the castle town, but it has a good stock, there are no issues with how the meat and vegetables were prepared, and the flavoring was handled well too. To be honest, it's shocking that someone who isn't a professional chef could prepare something this good."

"That's because Yamiru helps Asuta out with his business! It's only natural that she'd be good at cooking!"

Rau Lea was instantly put in a good mood, thanks to how careful Roy had been with his words, though even if the chef had said it was bad, the young clan head probably had enough control to not start swinging his fists over it. It was good that he was always so earnest about his feelings, for the most part. Around ten percent of the time, it turned out to be kind of a problem, but

fortunately that hadn't happened here.

"This was made with methods similar to yours, right, Mikel?" Roy asked, and the man in question, who had been silently slurping his soup, broke out in an annoyed look.

"There are similar aspects, but it's far from identical. Besides, if you break things down enough, eventually you'll see that everyone's cooking comes from the same roots."

"Really? The methods you and Varkas use don't seem very similar at all."

"If that's what you think, then you're only seeing the surface level of what cooking is."

Shilly Rou reacted to those words. "Hold on, Mikel. My master Varkas has said that your methods and those of the people of the forest's edge differ so completely from his own that it would be difficult for him to adopt them. Your words make it sound as if even Varkas is only seeing the surface level."

His expression souring even more, Mikel sighed.

"You two are so fussy. Do you think picking apart people's words is what will allow you to make delicious food? No matter how fine of a sentence you put together, will it do anything to change the taste of a dish?"

"No, but—"

"If they aren't similar on that surface level, methods *can* be difficult to adopt. Even I never considered using Varkas's methods in my own cooking," Mikel stated, his annoyed-looking eyes narrowing as he glared at Shilly Rou's face. "But all cooking is the same at its core. You aren't going to make a fine dish by just adding and subtracting things over and over. You have to examine the whole, and consider what impact the ingredients will have on one another as you try to bring them into balance. The difference between us was that I tried to make the original tastes of the ingredients stand out, while Varkas tries to distance himself from them. That's what makes it seem like our dishes are completely different, right?"

Shilly Rou stood there looking astonished, and then she hung her head dejectedly.

“My apologies... It was foolish of me to try to argue with you, when you are skilled enough to have earned Varkas’s acknowledgment. I hope that you can forgive me...”

“There’s nothing to forgive. I’m just saying that boasting alone won’t let you make a good meal.” Removing himself from the conversation, Mikel then audibly returned to slurping his soup.

Then Rau Lea broke out in a cheerful smile. “Ha ha, I understood so little of what you were saying that my bewilderment actually made it seem even more interesting! Manning the stove can be pretty difficult too, huh, Asuta?”

“Er, I hope you’re not expecting me to agree with you there...” I said with a strained chuckle. Mikel’s words had really impressed me. *Varkas tries to distance himself from the original taste of his ingredients, huh...? I see.*

I felt as if I could finally understand what it was that made Varkas’s cooking so mysterious. It was like the ultimate expression of the convoluted flavors people from the castle town enjoyed. His aim was to create idealized flavors that you couldn’t even imagine coming from the base ingredients. In which case, it was only natural to conclude that the way that Mikel and I tried to utilize the flavors of each ingredient to their fullest was the complete opposite.

Even so, both methods require a thorough understanding of cooking techniques, and of the flavors of the ingredients. So that’s what he meant when he said the surface level differs while the roots are the same, huh?

I felt a sense of eagerness down in the depths of my gut. It was like I had been given a whole new appreciation for just how skilled Mikel truly was as a chef. But, well, if I actually told him that, I was sure that he would end up getting as annoyed as Shilly Rou was, so I kept my gratitude for having met him bottled up inside my heart.

“Well then, why don’t we try something different? There are still all sorts of different dishes out there waiting,” I finally said.

With that, we said farewell to Rau Lea, Myme, and the others for the time being and moved on to the next spot.

We passed right by a whole roast giba that was still cooking and found a

young woman and two young men sitting on a nearby mat and talking without eating anything. Lala Ruu and Deem Rutim were having a back and forth, while Shin Ruu sat between them with his eyebrows drooping.

“Er, what’s all the commotion about?” I asked, unable to just pass on by, earning me a blazing glare from Lala Ruu’s blue eyes.

“It’s nothing! This guy’s just been running his mouth!”

“What do you mean, running my mouth? You’re the one who’s been spewing nonsense all this time.”

The boy from the Rutim clan looked just as angry as Lala Ruu. He was a hunter in training and was the same age as her—thirteen years old. I was somewhat familiar with him since he had been one of the guards we had taken with us to the castle town and for the trip to Dabagg.

“I was just complimenting Shin Ruu’s strength. But then this woman—”

“Any hunter of the forest’s edge could easily beat anyone from town, right? So why does it always have to be Shin Ruu?! He was just put in danger because of how much of a coward his opponent was—”

“But Shin Ruu defeated his opponent anyway, without so much as a scratch. He should be proud that he’s been requested for this next contest, since it means he has another chance to show them his strength, right?”

Apparently, they were discussing the swordsmanship tournament that was going to be held in the castle town. It wasn’t as if Shin Ruu had received an official invitation by name, but considering his connection to Geimalos’s son, Leiriss, it seemed highly likely that he’d be chosen.

“But the leading clan heads are the ones who will be deciding whether he’s actually going to participate or not, right?” I said.

“Yes, but of course they’re going to have him do it! The townsfolk challenged us to a contest of strength. There’s no way my dad and the others would refuse!” Lala Ruu replied.

It definitely stood to reason.

At any rate, I decided to focus on our guests instead. “Roy and Shilly Rou,

please go ahead and grab some food. This looks like a meat and vegetable stir-fry.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Roy said with a shrug. Shilly Rou hurried after him.

Then Ai Fa crossed her arms and remarked, “Hmm... This doesn’t sound like anything to argue over. Lala Ruu is worried for Shin Ruu’s safety, while Deem Rutim is praising his strength. Nothing about their two perspectives is contradictory... And both of them seem to be thinking of Shin Ruu, so why does he look so thoroughly troubled?”

She was right, he really did. Just the fact that his eyebrows were drooping a bit was more than enough to get his feelings across.

“Shin Ruu would never be defeated, no matter how bad the conditions might be for him. Worrying about him is like doubting his strength, isn’t it?”

Deem Rutim’s words caused Lala Ruu’s eyebrows to raise once more, but Ai Fa went ahead and interjected.

“I can certainly understand why a hunter might feel that way. However, Lala Ruu is not a hunter. Furthermore, she is more closely related to Shin Ruu than you are. It doesn’t seem proper to me for you to criticize her concerns.”

“Well, but...”

“You once showed a similarly strong attachment to Dan Rutim. I can certainly understand being drawn to powerful hunters, but it’s wrong to act in a way that troubles the person in question.”

Deem Rutim’s expression shifted, and he timidly glanced at Shin Ruu. “Was I bothering you that much...?”

“Well, I wouldn’t quite go that far... But I was trying to have a somewhat complicated discussion with Lala Ruu.”

“I see,” Deem Rutim replied, hanging his head. “I thought that woman was the one bothering you, so I was trying to help you out. I hope you’ll forgive me for interrupting when I shouldn’t have.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. You’re an important relative of mine as well.”

Deem Rutim wanted to become a full-fledged hunter as soon as possible, so it

was no surprise that he would admire Shin Ruu, who had become one of the top eight under the Ruu at the age of just sixteen. But at any rate, he bowed to Shin and Lala Ruu once more, and then trudged off into the darkness.

“Shin Ruu, was I actually bothering you with what I was saying...?” Lala Ruu now asked, her eyes narrowing in a way that tugged at my heartstrings as she looked at Shin Ruu. “I see... It’s not like you wanted to draw the nobles’ attention to you, so hearing me complain about it is probably just a hassle.”

“No, that’s not true.”

“I’m sorry. I know it’s an honor for a hunter to have their skill acknowledged and to be challenged to a contest of strength. Just like him, I wasn’t thinking of how you felt either.”

“I’m telling you, that’s not how it is, Lala Ruu,” Shin Ruu replied, placing his hands on the girl’s slender shoulders.

Lala Ruu’s blue eyes teared up a bit as she looked back at him.

“It’s true that it’s an honor for a hunter to have their strength acknowledged. And if that young noble, Leiriss, can clear away the regret he feels on behalf of his criminal father by facing me, that’s all the more reason for me to want to take him on... However, I don’t want to just ignore your feelings, Lala Ruu.”

The girl said nothing in response.

“I will show them the strength of a hunter of the forest’s edge without placing myself in danger. I pledge that to you here and now... So, Lala Ruu, would you be willing to watch over me?”

“Watch over you? But will we even be allowed to observe this contest of strength?”

“I’m not sure. But I have no intention of leaving you behind to go participate in that tournament. And I plan to tell Donda Ruu the same thing,” Shin Ruu stated, his cheeks flushing red. “It’s a show for nobles, so I’m sure those noblewomen are going to be there again. We’ve been told that we have no need to worry about them...but I don’t want to do anything to hurt you, Lala Ruu. And besides, you’re the one I want to show my skill to more than anyone else.”

Lala Ruu quietly replied, “Thanks...” With her eyes that were as blue as the sea still full of tears, she broke out in a joyful smile. It was a gentle expression, more mature than any I had ever seen from her.

I stealthily beckoned to Ai Fa and we slipped away. It would have been really insensitive to stick around any longer. Over at the next mat we headed to, we found not only Roy and Shilly Rou, but also Yumi and Telia Mas.

“Ah, you made it! Was everything okay over there?” Yumi asked.

“Yeah, they seem to have managed to figure things out.”

“Glad to hear it. Luia’s gonna be disappointed, but I’d still like to see Shin Ruu be happy,” she said with a teasing grin. It seemed Yumi had picked up on my real intention behind asking her to have her friend conceal her feelings toward Shin Ruu. “Well, why don’t you guys get something to eat too? This food is really tasty! It’s incredible how good everyone from the Ruu clan is at cooking!”

Unsurprisingly, Roy and Shilly Rou were once again eating with really serious expressions on their faces. Ai Fa and I sat down on one corner of the mat and shared in the meal.

It was a very ordinary meat and vegetable stir-fry. However, it had evolved quite a bit since the days when we had only had tau oil and myamuu to rely on, now employing mamaria vinegar and sugar as well. The chefs who had prepared it must have used the thick, sweet vinegar sauce I had devised as a base. The amount of mamaria vinegar in it had been kept to a minimum, so the dish as a whole was on the sweet side. Also, a small amount of chili pepper-like chitt seeds had been added to it, providing a nice accent.

As for the solid ingredients, it used giba rib meat, the usual aria, tino, nenon, and pula, and the zucchini-like chan. It was thick with giba fat, but the fresh vegetables helped to moderate that, giving it a very pleasant texture.

“All of the food you’re serving tonight truly is fantastic. Any one of these dishes would be able to sell just fine in the post town,” Telia Mas said from beside Yumi. Though she could be rather timid, she seemed to be enjoying this banquet just fine without getting overwhelmed, thanks to Yumi being by her side.

“You’ve got that right. I just wish we could have one of them help out at our place! I have no idea how these dishes would do in the castle town, though...” Yumi said, glancing over at Roy and Shilly Rou.

Shilly Rou turned away in a huff, while Roy bluntly replied, “Well, it feels a bit lacking with just pico leaves and chitt seeds, but the vinegar, sugar, and tau oil were utilized quite well... To be honest, I was shocked to hear that all of these women are able to prepare dishes of this level.”

“Well, the people of the forest’s edge tend to be extremely serious at their core, and they really don’t like wasting precious ingredients, so they put a lot of effort into manning the stove,” I said.

“Precious ingredients? But aren’t you people bringing in a ton of coins every single day? As far as things like sugar and mamaria vinegar are concerned, you should be able to purchase as much as you please.”

“Even if that’s true, that doesn’t change how they feel. And I strongly believe those feelings *shouldn’t* change either. Losing sight of the value of money could lead to losing sight of the value of their hunting work, after all.”

Roy held his tongue for a moment, then looked around at the people of the forest’s edge all enjoying that same dish. “Precious ingredients, huh? That attitude must be why Varkas doesn’t object to you taking whatever foodstuffs you want from the Turan pantry.”

“Varkas doesn’t concern himself with the viewpoints of the people of the forest’s edge,” Shilly Rou sulkily retorted. “Trial and error is essential for pursuing the ideal flavor. Varkas simply hates it when ingredients are used to make crude dishes, but he has no qualms against sacrificing them in the name of experimentation. If you people of the forest’s edge possessed the resolve to make the same sacrifice, no matter how much you had to waste, then you could improve your cooking even further, couldn’t you?”

“Well, there’s lots of chefs in the castle town who take that approach, but hardly any of them have earned Varkas’s approval, right? So basically, shouldn’t the most important thing be the weight of their resolve to do a good job? The desire to not waste ingredients could be a part of that resolve too,” Roy countered.

Shilly Rou shot Roy a glare, but didn't argue any further and instead just kept on eating.

Then a voice called out from behind me. "Hey there, Asuta!" When I turned to look, I found Ludo and Jiza Ruu standing there. "I see you've got some of our guests here too. That works out perfectly. I have a message from the old man. Would you mind if we invited those traveling performers to join the banquet?"

"The Gamley Troupe? But why?"

They were still nearby in their wagons on the outskirts of the settlement. They had succeeded in their goal of capturing a giba, but since they had made it back so close to sunset, they had ended up deciding to remain here through tomorrow morning. I had secretly been thinking that since they were still around we might as well ask them if they wanted to eat with us, but I had held my tongue because I figured Donda Ruu would never approve.

"Well, they did save those two guys from the branch houses. According to Shin Ruu and Mida, those men would have died if they hadn't been there. The Ruu clan would like to repay them for that, but it would be bad to ignore what our guests and subordinate clans want to do and just invite them because it's convenient for us, right? So Jiza and I are going around to see what everyone thinks." Jiza Ruu nodded from his position behind his younger brother. "The other clan heads and the rest of the guests have already given their permission, so that just leaves you four and the Fa clan. Please, give us your honest opinions."

"This is the Ruu clan's banquet, so I have no intention of opposing your decision..." Ai Fa quietly replied.

"You don't mind?" Ludo Ruu asked with a tilt of his head. "Don't you hate that one weak-looking guy? If our guests start arguing with each other, it'll be a problem for us too."

"I have no desire to cause any kind of commotion. But I *would* like you to tell them to watch themselves as well."

"We'll tell that Pino girl, then. She seems highly capable when it comes to handling her comrades," Jiza Ruu said, and then he looked over at the townsfolk with his usual narrowed eyes. "What about you guests? This banquet is meant

to welcome you, so we would like to prioritize your feelings on the matter.”

Naturally, nobody objected. Shilly Rou looked a bit uneasy, but she herself had been permitted to join at the last minute, so she probably felt like she was in no position to complain.

“Sounds good to me! If they perform some tricks for us, this banquet’ll be even more fun!” said Yumi, the only one of them who had a big bright smile on her face.

Jiza Ruu nodded in acknowledgment, but it was impossible to tell what he was really thinking. “Right. Well then, we will be inviting the traveling performers to join us shortly. Should something happen, no matter what it may be, the Ruu clan will take responsibility for dealing with it, so know that you have nothing to worry about and please continue to enjoy the banquet.”

And so, just as the festivities were reaching their midpoint, some unexpected guests ended up being added to the mix.

3

The members of the Gamley Troupe were gathered before the ritual fire. I had never seen all of them together like this. None of us had.

There was Gamley the fire wielder, a one-armed and one-eyed middle-aged man who wore a red turban and a long coat, plus some jangling accessories.

And then we had Pino the acrobat, who only looked to be twelve or thirteen, judging from her appearance, with her black hair braided and flowing down her back, clad in a vermilion outfit similar to a furisode.

Next up was the minstrel Neeya, who was rather slender and seemed like a pretty dashing fellow when he wasn’t talking. He was wearing something like a flat cap and had a guitar-like instrument on his back.

Then there was Shantu the beast tamer, an old man in a patched-together gray robe who looked like some sort of mountain hermit, with a white beard that dangled down to his chest.

Following that was Rolo the knight king, a strange scrawny girl dressed like a

man, with eyes that were always nervously darting about, and whose performance was something like a pantomime.

Doga the strongman was easily over two meters tall and burly like a northerner, with a shiny shaved head and calm blue eyes.

Zan the knife thrower was a little guy with a body like a child's and arms like some sort of ape's, who wore a strange mask.

Nachara the flute player was an enchanting woman with slightly dark skin clad in a robe with Sym-style embroidering.

Dilo the jar man was tall, lean, and as expressionless as an easterner. He was wearing a gray turban and a long black cloak.

The young twins Arun and Amin, who looked as adorable as a pair of little angels with their pale hair and eyes, were currently clinging to one another loosely.

As for Railanos the star reader, he was a blind old man whose wrinkled face with the strange swirling patterns all over it was hidden under a hooded cloak.

Finally, Zetta the beastman's fiery golden eyes were gleaming in the light of the fire, his figure completely hidden under a hooded cloak as well.

Those were the thirteen members of the group.

There were also the four beasts behind Shantu as well.

Huey was an algura silver lion with light-gray fur. Next to him was Sara, a gaaje leopard. She was slightly smaller than the lion, and sleeker too, with two sharp fangs sticking out of her mouth. Then you had their young cub, Druey, who had the characteristics of both a lion and a leopard. And the last one was the black vamda ape, which was shorter than Doga due to its undersized legs despite being even larger in terms of overall build, and had black fur and red eyes.

The animals were here with everyone else because the three adults among them had apparently played a major role in saving those men from the branch houses, along with Rolo. I didn't know all the details, but from what I had heard, the black ape had managed to pin the massive giba that had been attacking

them, and Rolo had finished it off with a wooden sword. Shantu had asked for the animals to be allowed to attend as well for their actions.

“Today, this group of people gathered before us accomplished their goal of capturing a young giba. And tomorrow morning, they will be leaving the Ruu settlement and departing Genos,” Donda Ruu declared in a rumbling voice as he stood beside Granny Jiba. “I wished to show them our gratitude tomorrow for saving two of our people, but they insisted that wouldn’t be necessary, so we decided that we would show them our thanks with tonight’s banquet. I would like to thank our other guests for permitting them to participate as well.”

The rest of the guests were scattered here and there around the plaza, listening to Donda Ruu’s words. Ai Fa and I were still currently sticking close to Roy and Shilly Rou.

“They also protected our comrades from danger in the post town during the revival festival. People from outside of Genos have few ties with us people of the forest’s edge, and that makes it difficult for us to know how to interact with them, but as the Ruu clan head, I wish to repay the debt we owe them. I hope that we can all treat each other fairly and equitably without any discord... This is the troupe’s leader, Gamley.”

“Yes, yes, I’m Gamley.”

“You were all admitted into the forest under the orders of the ruler of this land, Duke Genos. You paid for the right to be here, so there would normally be no need for either of us to feel indebted to the other. However, you risked yourselves in order to save our comrades. That undoubtedly *does* put us in your debt, and I would like to repay it.”

“I’m just glad those folks who were injured escaped with their lives.”

“Will you swear once more that the twelve people and four beasts who follow you shall do us no harm?”

“I’ll swear it as many times as you want. We have no reason to harm anybody in the first place. The only time we ever bare our fangs is when our safety is threatened.”

“Then I hope you will all enjoy this banquet, just like our other guests. Go

ahead and avail yourselves of the meat and wine on offer here to your heart's content."

"We are truly grateful for your kindness, leading clan head Donda Ruu. Allow us to show our gratitude by performing for you with everything we have," Gamley stated, raising his right arm. With that, Zan started banging on a drum, and Nachara began blowing into her flute. Arun and Amin had some metallic instruments that they were playing as well, and suddenly there was some kind of exotic musical accompaniment resounding throughout the plaza.

The people of the forest's edge cheered in admiration, and Pino stepped forward, her vermilion furisode and long braided hair fluttering around as she began elegantly dancing. The fascinating and fantastical sight of her illuminated by the ritual flame was enough to leave one breathless.

With Pino dancing in a circle about the ritual flame, Shantu began clapping his hands in time with the instruments, and Huey, Sara, and Druey started walking behind her. The animals moved around the flames without showing even the slightest hint of fear. The people of the forest's edge cheered even louder for them and started clapping along with Shantu.

Donda Ruu sat down next to Granny Jiba, stroking his bearded face. He must have decided there was no need to say anything more at this point. After all, things were now even more lively in the plaza than they had been before the troupe was invited.

A mysterious melody that felt both cheerful and nostalgic was filling the nighttime forest air. The troupe members who weren't busy sat down on the ground and clapped along, drank fruit wine, or just silently hung their heads. The hooded pair of Zetta and Railanos in particular seemed like they were feeling out of place as they huddled together. Even so, the excitement surrounding the banquet was reaching its peak.

After several minutes, the music playing and parading wrapped up, and Gamley stood up to approach the ritual flame. Most of the instruments fell silent, leaving just the frail, extended sound of Nachara's flute. And then, butterflies made of flame started fluttering out of the ritual fire, as if in response to that sound.



The red, blue, and green butterflies rose up into the sky, leaving behind sparks like how a moth would shed its scales, before vanishing after a few moments. The people of the forest's edge let out a roaring cheer, and a thundering round of applause washed over the Gamley Troupe.

"They certainly are a remarkable group. They were even able to make the people of the forest's edge accept them not through words, but through their performances," Ai Fa commented while enthusiastically biting into some giba meat, though the show didn't seem to have especially moved her. On her other side from where I was situated, Roy and Shilly Rou were sitting and staring absentmindedly. It seemed the Gamley Troupe's performance had left them completely awestruck.

"Those were some impressive tricks. They could earn a lot of money in the castle town like that, don't you think?" Roy said.

"Such a questionable group would never be permitted entrance, though." Shilly Rou stated, even as she was sighing in admiration.

"Well then, let's keep going. Things seem pretty lively over there too."

We had still only sampled around half of what the Ruu clan had prepared, so we moved on to greedily seek out the next dish.

The mat where the Rutim clan was gathered turned out to be our next destination. Dan, Gazraan, Ama Min, Raa, and Morun Rutim—the entire main house—were all present. Dora's family was still there too, with some thoughtful women bringing helpings of one dish after another over to them.

"Hey, Asuta! That performance just now was amazing! I can see why Tara's so taken with them!" Dora said, looking as cheerful as always with his face red from drinking. His sons and the women of the household were smiling and eating food.

Tara and Rimee Ruu, meanwhile, were excitedly cuddling little Druey. Druey naturally hadn't taken part in the giba hunt, but he had been brought along because he would have been lonely without Huey or Sara. The adorable little critter that looked like a stuffed animal seemed completely unafraid of the fire as it played with the two girls.

“Ooh, you’re those chefs from the castle town, aren’t you?! Now that you’re here visiting the forest’s edge, the first thing you should do is have some giba ribs!” Dan Rutim declared.

Picking up on her father-in-law’s signal, Ama Min Rutim held out a plate that had several spare ribs on it, giving off a heavy herbal aroma.

“Finally, a dish that uses herbs as one of its main aspects,” Shilly Rou remarked, seemingly having pulled herself back together as she reached out toward the plate. It must have been herb grilled, which was a specialty of Reina and Sheera Ruu’s. Shilly Rou very politely bit the meat off the bone, then after slowly chewing, leaned in close to Roy. “What do you think?”

“Well, they seem to have used three types of herbs. I’m sure Varkas would be able to identify them, but all I can say is that I find it fantastic.”

“I have to agree... The tau oil and sugar were put to good use. I wouldn’t be surprised to see a dish of this quality sold at pretty much any restaurant, other than The Silver Star.”

“What are you whispering about? Giba ribs are tasty, aren’t they?” Dan Rutim asked with a blank stare.

“Yeah.” Roy nodded at him. “Though rib meat is highly fatty, these herbs pair with it quite well. It’s very delicious.”

“Right?! Rib meat marinated in fruit wine and myamuu is great too, but this dish is just fantastic! I feel like if I don’t hold myself back, I’ll end up eating nothing but ribs!”

Having someone so massive talk to her was enough to cause Shilly Rou to shrink back a bit, but Dan Rutim wasn’t the sort to change his behavior depending on who he was talking to, so with a hearty laugh, he took a swig of his fruit wine.

Since they had lots of different kinds of food here, we went ahead and had a seat too. Ai Fa’s appetite had been on the rise lately, and it seemed she had decided now was the time to satisfy it. We had only eaten a little at each of our stops as we went around with Roy and Shilly Rou, so she must have been feeling rather irritated.

“Ah, Ama Min Rutim, how are you feeling?” I whispered, since her pregnancy wasn’t common knowledge yet.

She smiled at me and replied, “I haven’t had any issues. I don’t think it’ll be much longer before I decide to tell everyone else the good news. But when that time comes, I’ll have to step back from my work in the post town.”

“Right. You should always put your health first.”

“Thank you. When the time comes, Morun should be able to start going to town in my place.”

After she finished handing out food to the guests, Morun Rutim walked over to join us.

“It’s been a while, Ai Fa and Asuta. Um, will the contest of strength with Lem Dom be held soon?”

“Hmm? Yes, I expect that will be happening not more than ten days from now,” Ai Fa replied.

“I see...” Morun Rutim said, casting her gaze downward. Her plump figure was kind of similar to her father’s. She also had his personality, boldness aside, so she must have been awfully upset about something to be acting this way.

“What’s the matter? Do you have some sort of connection to Lem Dom?”

“No, not to Lem Dom... She was away from home the whole time I was at the northern settlement, after...”

Now that she mentioned it, she *had* spent quite a long while there providing cooking lessons.

“Ai Fa, is it even possible that you could lose to Lem Dom in a contest of strength between hunters?”

Ai Fa’s mouth was stuffed with giba meat and baked poitan, but after a moment she held her arms up, swallowed it all down, and answered, “If we fought a hundred times, Lem Dom wouldn’t get the better of me even once. But if we fought *more* than a hundred times, it’s possible that I could end up being the one on the ground at least once.”

“I see. Then in the end, Lem Dom will have to go back to living as a woman,”

Morun Rutim stated, sounding relieved. However, Ai Fa tilted her head questioningly in response.

“We can’t say that for sure until it actually happens. If she does try more than a hundred times, she may well beat me at some point.”

“Huh? But doesn’t she only have a single chance?”

“No, it’s not just one bout. It’s one whole day,” Ai Fa plainly stated. “After I have regained my strength as a hunter, I shall devote one full day to Lem Dom. If she can beat me during that time, then she will be qualified to live as a hunter.”

“Huh?! Why did you offer her terms like that?!”

“That was what seemed fair. And looking at it another way, even if she did manage to beat me once in a contest of strength, that wouldn’t necessarily mean she’s strong enough to be a hunter. After all, a hunter needs to have enough endurance to keep moving around in the forest for hours on end,” Ai Fa said, slurping some soup. “She will challenge me to contests of strength all day, and if she can steal a victory before running out stamina, then it will be proof that she has what it takes to live as a hunter. There aren’t even many men at the forest’s edge who could achieve such a victory, after all.”

“Then...there’s a chance that Lem Dom could win?” Morun Rutim asked, sadly hanging her head.

Looking more and more perplexed, Ai Fa said, “Perhaps, but her odds of victory are quite low. And if she does happen to win, it will prove she is as strong as a man. Why are you so sad about that?”

“Well, I’m just worried about Deek Dom... He truly wishes for her to live as a woman.”

I was still wondering why that meant she had to look so down, but Ai Fa continued by taking things in an entirely different direction.

“My mother truly wished for me to live as a woman as well. Her soul returned to the forest before she could see me become a hunter...but had she lived on, I have no idea how she would have felt about it.”

Morun Rutim stared at Ai Fa, sadness still in her eyes.

However, Ai Fa answered her expression with a terribly serious gaze.

“It is impossible to know how Deek Dom will truly feel about this until it actually comes to pass. But I would hope that he will feel blessed as the one and only family member she has if she manages to find a path through life that makes her happy... That is all I have to say.”

“Right.” Morun Rutim nodded, bringing her hands together in front of her chest and bowing deeply to Ai Fa. “I ask that you take good care of Lem Dom. And I will pray to the forest for those two from the Dom clan to find their way to happiness.”

“Indeed,” Ai Fa replied with a hearty nod.

At around the same time, there seemed to be a bit of a commotion brewing in the center of the plaza. Looking in that direction, I saw Rolo getting dragged over to the ritual flame by an unfamiliar man. She seemed to be shouting something, but I couldn’t make it out from here. However, it appeared to me that she was being challenged to a contest of strength.

“Ah, that girl’s supposedly quite strong! Not just anyone can finish off a giba with a wooden sword!” Dan Rutim remarked with a hearty chuckle. Rolo was so incredibly timid that I was worried about whether it was okay to allow this to go on, but it seemed she was able to stiffen her resolve as well after a word from Gamley.

As the crowd around them cheered, the contest of strength kicked off...and in a single instant, the man was down on the ground. He had tried to reach out toward her, but she had grabbed him by the arm and swept his legs out from underneath him for an easy takedown.

Rolo bowed repeatedly to the man lying on the ground, but then another challenger stepped forward in front of her. However, he was defeated just as easily, this time by a move that reminded me of the aikido technique known as kotegaeshi. And yet again, Rolo started bowing profusely in apology.

“Hmm. She seems quite skilled at redirecting force! That’s an impressive technique. She hardly has to use any of her own strength!” Dan Rutim

commented, his eyes sparkling as his huge frame leaned forward. “How interesting! Perhaps I should challenge her as well!”

“Hold on. It would be rather tactless for someone strong enough to be in our top eight to suddenly throw himself into something that’s just supposed to be a performance, don’t you think?” Gazraan Rutim said, gently chiding his father.

In the meantime, Doga had also been recruited to engage in a contest of strength. Though it was a close match, the giant managed to force his opponent to the ground in the end. The hunters cheered his victory, and a sizable crowd gathered around the two of them.

“Hmm. So there really are townsfolk like that after all. Even if our men have been drinking, it’s pretty amazing that those two have the skill to defeat hunters of the forest’s edge in a contest of strength,” a low voice belonging to a young man suddenly said next to me. It hadn’t come from any of the people who had been sitting on the mat, but rather from a tall man who was passing by... The second son of the main Ruu house, Darmu Ruu.

Beside him was Sheera Ruu, who I hadn’t seen all evening. She gave us a slight bow, while Darmu Ruu was glaring at Ai Fa.

“Plus, that little one is a woman dressed like a man. As a fellow woman, are you really not going to challenge her, Ai Fa?”

“Hmm? That girl seems to be quite skilled, and I’ve only just started training to regain my strength, so I would need at least ten more days before I could beat her.”

“That’s rather timid of you. It seems even you’ve had some of the brashness knocked out of you after all the times you’ve been injured.”

Somehow, Darmu Ruu’s tone seemed different than usual. Perhaps thinking the same thing, Ai Fa raised a doubtful eyebrow and said, “Ah, so you’ve finally healed enough to be allowed to drink fruit wine again?”

“That’s right. As you can see, the skin’s grown back enough to cover the tendons,” Darmu Ruu said, switching his bottle of fruit wine over to his left hand and showing us his right palm. There was indeed a fresh layer of pinkish skin across it. The idea that the flesh underneath had been exposed until

recently felt painful to even imagine. “Before much longer, I’ll be able to grip a sword again, and as soon as I can do that, I’ll be able to head back into the forest right away. After all, I kept training every part of my body other than this hand.”

“I see. That’s certainly good news.”

“Your wounds have healed too, haven’t they? But it takes a long time to get your strength back after fracturing a rib.”

It was rare for Darmu Ruu to be this talkative, and he kinda sounded like he was getting worked up over something. And seeing how the scar on his right cheek was flushed red, it seemed that he had been drinking quite a bit.

Is this gonna be a problem? I’m honestly a bit worried...

I had only seen Darmu Ruu look this animated once before, on the first night we stayed over at the Ruu settlement, when he confronted Ai Fa and started complaining about her life choices.

He really was at his worst that night. Honestly, my impression of him had hardly been any different from my impression of Diga. He had been rude and verbally abusive toward Ai Fa, insisting she should quit playing at being a hunter and marry him instead.

But knowing nothing of my concerns, Darmu Ruu knelt down and peered at Ai Fa’s face. His eyes shone like a wild wolf’s as he glared at her up close and personal.

“Thinking back, we’ve both gotten injured at the same time a lot, Ai Fa. When I got this scar on my face, you hurt your right arm. And when my hand was wounded, you injured your ribs.”

“Yes, you are indeed correct about that.”

“Yet once again, it seems I’ll be making it back to the forest first. That must be pretty frustrating for you, considering how much you scorn me.”

Ai Fa tilted her head and looked perplexed, though her expression barely changed. “You said something similar before in the post town. But I have no quarrel with you, nor have I ever regarded you with scorn.”

“Don’t be ridiculous... No one has ever shunned me harder than you.”

“Why do you say that? You aren’t the only one who couldn’t accept me living as a hunter, and besides...you had a reason to feel angry. I *was* rather harsh when I rejected the Ruu clan’s offer to take me in as a bride.”

Darmu Ruu frowned heavily and continued glaring at Ai Fa’s face. However, it had no effect on her flawless composure.

“At any rate, I’m glad to see that you have been able to recover your strength as a hunter so quickly. Even more so, considering how severe Donda Ruu’s injuries were. As I have been permitted to call myself a friend of the Ruu clan, I would like to wish you well.”

“Hmph, wish me well?!” Darmu Ruu snapped back, suddenly getting up. The scar on his right cheek was turning even redder. “Whenever I let you talk, you always end up getting cheeky with me! If you’re frustrated that I’m ahead of you, then come out and say it!”

“I’m telling you, I hold no such feelings... You’re acting like a child, Darmu Ruu,” Ai Fa said, letting a strained chuckle escape her.

Darmu Ruu clawed at his head, but then Sheera Ruu finally decided to speak up, unable to stay silent any longer. “My apologies, Ai Fa... Darmu Ruu, you’ve had too much fruit wine to drink. It’s been some time since you last partook, so you need to have some restraint.”

“You’re the one who was so persistent about getting me to start drinking again in the first place, aren’t you?! So why are you lecturing me again now?!”

This was definitely the alcohol talking. As Ai Fa had said, his words and actions were growing more and more childish. Sheera Ruu was smiling at the young hunter, but she looked an awful lot like the mother of a troublemaking kid.

“If you’re going to be drinking, then you should eat something too. The whole roast giba is just about ready, you know.”

“Hmph!” Darmu Ruu snorted, his gaze turning toward Ai Fa once more. “Ai Fa! There are two types of hunter who frequently get injured! Those who aren’t strong enough, and those who keep fighting giba head-on with no fear!”

“Indeed.”

“You were strong enough to make it into the top eight in one of the Ruu clan’s contests of strength, so you definitely aren’t weak! Still, when you’re injured, you make the members of your clan worry for you! And even if that guy’s a sketchy outsider, you still see him as an important member of your family, don’t you?! If you don’t want to make him sad, then don’t be so arrogant when you’re out there doing your duty as a hunter from now on!”

“Hmm. While I’d like to repeat those exact same words back at you, I cannot say you’re completely wrong. I always intended to continue doing the best I can in the future, but I will also be sure to keep your words in mind.”

Darmu Ruu glared at my perfectly calm clan head for a while longer, and then he turned and staggered off. Sheera Ruu bowed to us, still smiling in exactly the same way, before following after him.

“Hmm... He seems to have gotten quite drunk from his first taste of wine in so long. I had to abstain from it for a while too when my leg was injured, and after that I was only able to drink half as much as I could before,” Dan Rutim remarked, taking a swig of fruit wine with a hearty chuckle. “And Darmu Ruu wasn’t all that strong of a drinker to begin with. He didn’t mean anything bad by it, though, so pay him no mind, Ai Fa.”

“I’m not bothered. If anything, I’m happy.”

“Oh, is that so? Then I guess I didn’t need to say anything.” And with that, Dan Rutim returned to his friendly chat with Dora’s family.

I brought my mouth close to Ai Fa’s ear. “You were happy? I was breaking out in a cold sweat, myself. Haven’t had that happen in a while...”

“I didn’t need Dan Rutim to tell me that there was no ill intent behind Darmu Ruu’s words. He was concerned for me, in his own way. There has been some bad blood between us in the past, though, so it makes me happy to know that our relationship is finally improving,” she said, chuckling a bit again. “Besides, even if it *was* because of the alcohol, he was acting just like a little kid. Who would have guessed that he had that kind of a cute side to him.”

“Cute? Who, Darmu Ruu?”

“Indeed. He is a fine hunter with enough courage to even let himself be injured for the sake of his family. And he’s fierce like Donda Ruu as well. I think it’s very cute when a man of his character acts like such a child.”

I was left at a loss for words.

Ai Fa had been wearing a real, honest smile, but now she was raising a questioning eyebrow at me. “What is it? You’re making a pretty strange face there, Asuta.”

“Ah, no, you see... Er, I think you’ll probably understand my feelings if you imagine me calling another girl around our age cute?” I said, but then I started waving my hands in a fluster. “No, wait, that sounded way too pathetic! Just forget I said anything!”

“I cannot simply forget the things I hear,” Ai Fa replied, her lovely lips shifting into a frown. “I most certainly didn’t mean anything like what you’re implying when I said he was cute. Shouldn’t you have realized that much yourself, Asuta?”

“Hey, that’s why I’m saying I was wrong.”

“Even if Darmu Ruu were a woman, he isn’t someone I would want for a bride.”

“I-I get it, okay? It was just such an unexpected comment that it caught me completely off guard. Please, forgive me.”

Ai Fa continued staring at my face suspiciously, but then she seemed to make up her mind and brought her mouth close to my ear.

“You’re the one I find cutest of all, Asuta.”

I had been slain by a surprise attack, but at least nobody could see the way my face was changing color, thanks to the bonfire being the only source of illumination in the plaza.

All around us, the Ruu, their related clans, and their guests partied on, showing no signs whatsoever that they were getting tired or slowing down.

“Oh, so this is where you were.” Reina Ruu approached us carrying a large plate—big enough to be quite an armful for her—packed with golden-brown, freshly fried, piping hot giba cutlets. Fortunately, the color of my face had mostly gone back to normal by now

“It seems the fires are a little too weak, so the whole roast giba aren’t finished yet, but we made some of these in the meantime. Would you like to have some?”

Everyone piped up in response, Dan Rutim first among them, but Reina Ruu’s gaze remained firmly fixed on Roy and Shilly Rou.

We washed our dirty plates with water from a jug, and the giba cutlets were quickly portioned out onto them. A woman from the branch houses who was carrying a large amount of shredded tino with her then handed some out to all of us to go with our meat.

Worcestershire sauce and sheel fruit juice had been prepared for the giba cutlets, as well as a dressing for the shredded tino. Dora chose the thick Worcestershire sauce and started chowing down on giba cutlets with a joyful smile on his face, which was flushed red from the wine. “This is really good!” he said. “I’ve had fried food at your stalls and even won the giba cutlet sandwich a couple times, but this is exceptional!”

“Ah, that’s because we’ve been using reten oil in the meals we make for the stalls lately. But these were made with giba lard. And our giba cutlet sandwiches are prepared in advance, but freshly fried cutlets have a totally different feel to them.”

While I was explaining, I went ahead and took a hearty bite out of a giba cutlet myself. The coating was nice and crispy, and it had been cooked just the right amount. Frying the cutlets in giba lard gave them an incredibly strong flavor, but not an overly heavy one, so I felt like they had a cleaner taste than tonkatsu prepared with cooking oil, and I had no complaints about them.

“How is it?” Reina Ruu asked, kneeling down on our mat and staring straight at Roy and Shilly Rou from the front.

Having tried the giba cutlets with both Worcestershire sauce and sheel fruit juice, Roy replied, “It’s delicious. You all really seem to have a knack for fried

foods. I haven't tried making them very often, because they feel like they're behind the times, but regardless, I'm completely certain that I wouldn't be able to make such a fine fried dish with karon or kimyuus."

"And what do you think?" Reina Ruu asked Shilly Rou next.

"Well, the impression it gives is rather different from the fried food I once had in the castle town," she replied in a low voice as she stared at the cross-section of a cutlet she had bit into. "It was a dish served at a banquet that used milk fat, dried milk, and herbs such as sarfaal. I believe if you tried selling this kind of meal in the castle town, people would be happier with something more like that."

Reina Ruu kept on silently listening.

"But in terms of pure taste, this dish most certainly doesn't come up short. You fried it in giba lard rather than reten oil or milk fat?"

"Yes, since that is what we prefer here at the forest's edge."

"I think it's quite good. Giba are truly a fantastic source of ingredients, both in terms of their meat and their fat," Shilly Rou concluded.

As he happily bit into his cutlet, Dan Rutim said, "You've got that right! And now that I think about it, you're that girl who was there that night with the nobles from that Banarm place, aren't you? Real giba cutlets are great, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't say the quality of the cutlet dish I had in the castle town was much lower than this one's, and besides, I believe Varkas's broiled gilebuss fish is better than either," Shilly Rou firmly replied while shying away a bit. Now that Dan Rutim brought it up, I recalled that they had both been there for the taste testing in the castle town that time when I had presented the Milanese cutlets.

"Hmm. I guess the tastes of us people of the forest's edge and you townsfolk must be pretty different! But you still managed to serve our people an impressive meal the other day, didn't you? Ludo Ruu was bragging about it!" Dan Rutim remarked, leaning forward with his goggle-eyes sparkling, only for Shilly Rou to fall back further. "I'd love to try your cooking too, if that's possible! Especially if you could make something with giba meat!"

“We still are not permitted to handle giba meat in the castle town.”

“Well, we did just deliver a load of giba sausages to the nobles yesterday. Those are difficult to sell in the post town, but maybe they’ll find a market in the castle town eventually,” I said, earning me a glare from Shilly Rou.

“Is that true? Giba meat will be sold in the castle town?” she asked, her tone demanding.

“Y-Yeah. As long as Duke Genos gives his permission, of course.”

“I see...” she said, pensively gazing downward.

“What’s the matter? Did I say something to offend you?”

“Of course not. If that’s true, then you should have told me sooner.”

“Huh? You’re interested in giba meat, Shilly Rou?”

She glared at me again, but this time she looked almost astounded at my words. “I cannot adopt your methods, but giba is an ingredient on par with karon and gyama. As a chef, it’s only natural that I would wish to start working with it as quickly as possible.”

“That’s right. I mean, Varkas goes out of his way to have live gyama delivered all the way from Sym. The idea that we have an ingredient as fine as giba so close at hand, and yet we’re unable to make use of it is seriously frustrating,” Roy added.

“I see,” I replied, feeling deeply moved. “Varkas doesn’t let his feelings about that kind of thing show, so I never considered that. I can’t remember him ever expressing much interest in giba meat.”

“Well, my understanding is that he spends a fair amount of time every day experimenting with the ingredients he already has access to. He may not have any time left for giba meat, but he definitely wants it.”

“I can certainly understand that,” I said with a chuckle.

Then Ludo Ruu approached us and said, “Hey, the croquettes are finished now, so I was told to take them around to the guests. Make sure you leave enough for me, okay?”

He was holding a plate with one of his favorites on it—giba meat and chatchi croquettes. The chefs had really prepared a lavish range of dishes for tonight, perfect for a welcome banquet like this one.

“These must have taken quite a bit of skill too. You made them by mixing aria and mashed chatchi together and then frying them?” Roy asked, looking a bit discouraged as he scratched his head. “Damn. There’s no way I’ll be able to keep up with you guys when it comes to fried foods.”

Nobody responded to that statement.

“Now that I think about it, I’ve never seen Varkas make a fried dish either. Is it possible he’s actually not that good at it?” he continued.

“Fried dishes are out of style, so he never receives any orders for them. Isn’t it only natural that he would never have a need to make that kind of food if nobody asks him for it? There’s no such thing as a dish that falls outside of Varkas’s expertise,” Shilly Rou snapped in a huff.

Seeing the look on her face seemed to make Roy grin. “Then you’ve never tasted his fried cooking either. Trying to elevate your master without any proof to back up your claims might end up bringing indignity upon him, don’t you think?”

“You are the last person I want to hear talking about indignity,” Shilly Rou retorted, turning away in a standoffish manner.

Reina Ruu had been watching their exchange with a look of satisfaction, but that last part made her frown a bit. “You two seem to be awfully close to one another, almost like a married couple.”

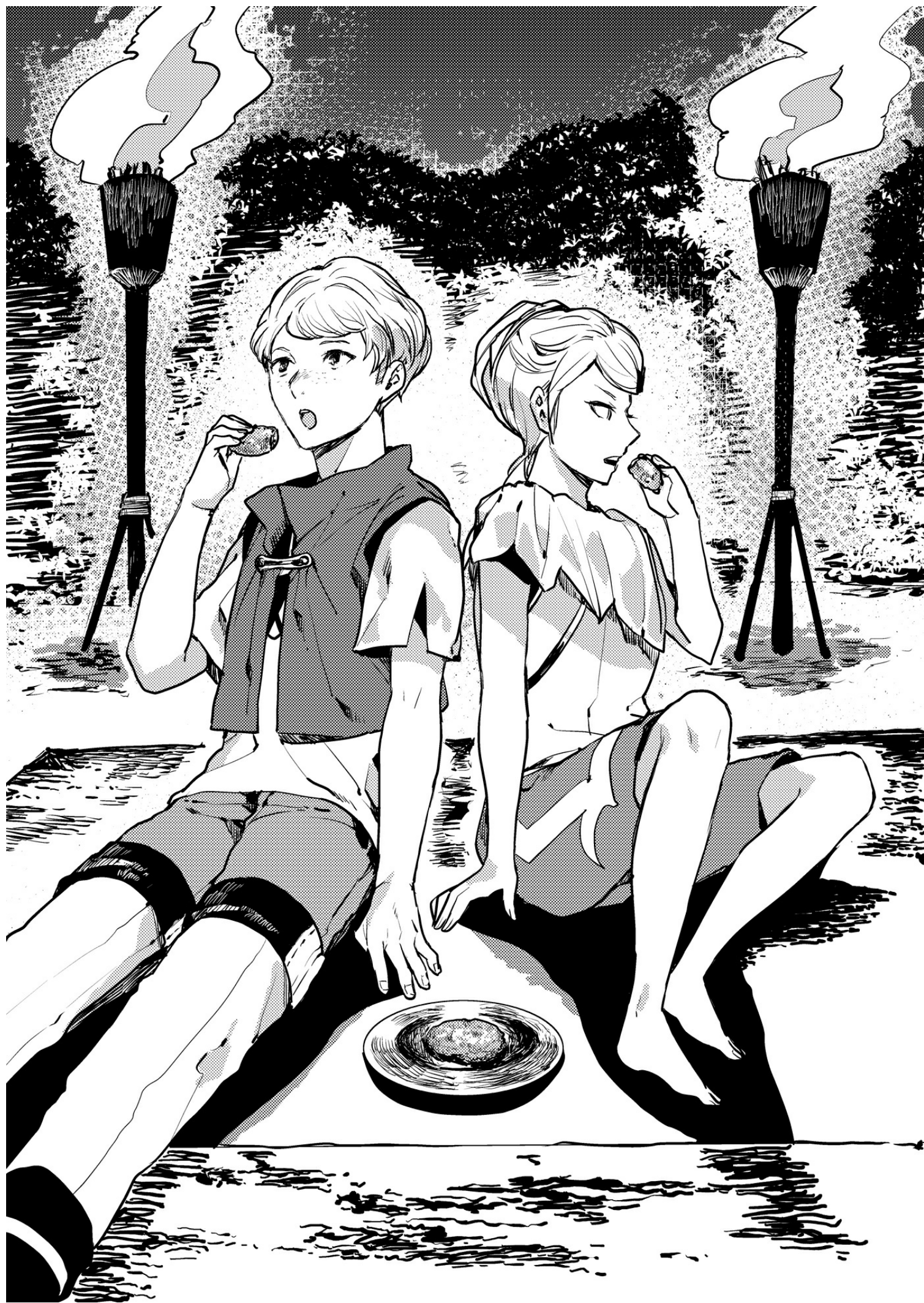
“Huh? A married couple? I should warn you, I might be willing to let that kind of bizarre comment slide, but Shilly Rou is liable to jump down your throat if you keep saying things like that,” Roy said.

“Really? But at the forest’s edge, men and women who aren’t married or family would never sit as close to each other as you two are.”

“It’s crowded, so there’s no helping it. And unlike me, Shilly Rou had a fine upbringing, so she’s a little nervous to have all these hunters around. It’s not like she’s clinging to me because she wants to.”

“I-I’m not nervous, and I’m not clinging either!”

It was worth noting that Roy and Shilly Rou were indeed sitting so close to one another on the mat that they were almost touching. Reina Ruu was watching them with her eyes half-closed in a way that reminded me of a Buddha statue, but then she just bowed politely and left.



At the same time, a loud thump resounded through the air. Looking toward its source, I saw Doga's massive frame there, collapsed on the ground. Beside him was Mida, whose body was even larger than the strongman's.

A few meters away, Rolo was yelling "Grah!" as a young man managed to pin the lanky woman.

The winner jumped to his feet, shouting, "All right!" Surprisingly, it looked like the young man was Rau Lea.

"What?! Why did they get to fight before me?! Mida and Rau Lea both made it into the top eight too, didn't they, Gazraan?"

"Yes, it seems that the other men were no match. Our guests' strength is undeniably impressive."

"Yup! I'd love to face off with them myself!" Dan Rutim shouted and started to rise, but then the musicians gathered in front of the ritual fire once more and started playing that cheerful and nostalgic tune again. Doga and Rolo then walked off into a corner, as if driven away by the music.

"Oh, that's 'The Moon Goddess's Melody'! Come on everyone, let's dance!" I heard Yumi call out from a short distance away. She grabbed Telia Mas and dragged her over to the ritual flame. The other girl was smiling, but she looked a little nervous.

The rhythm was a relaxed triple time. Yumi was dancing and fluttering along with the melody, which was lively and yet also somehow melancholic. Telia Mas seemed kind of embarrassed, but Yumi shot her an earnest grin and she started timidly going through the steps.

Apparently, it was the same dance we had seen in the Daleim lands, and soon several other women joined them. Ten of them formed a ring with the ritual flame and the musicians in the center. The men cheered and started clapping their hands and stamping their feet. Huey and Sara even stepped forward and began hopping along with the beat.

"Ooh, that looks fun! Tara, let's go dance too!" Rimee Ruu exclaimed.

"Yeah!"

With that, the two young girls took off running, and even more cheers sounded out for the adorable pair.

You wouldn't normally see girls under the age of fifteen dancing at a banquet, because usually at events like this one, dancing was a means of courtship. However, today's banquet was meant to entertain guests, and with Rimee Ruu and Tara joining the dance, a lot of other young girls, even up to the ages of thirteen and fourteen, happily threw themselves into the merrymaking too.

"This is amazing. Inviting the Gamley Troupe to join us was a great idea," I said, and Ai Fa nodded in response, looking highly satisfied. She must have been happy to see Rimee Ruu enjoying herself so much.

Soon the melody shifted to a brighter quadruple-time, and the girls started dancing more energetically to match it. It seemed like nobody knew the steps to this one, as the choreography was all over the place. They were just moving with the rhythm, but they still looked graceful doing it. At some point, a few of the men started blowing into grass whistles, but fortunately it didn't clash with Nachara's flute playing too much.

"What're you doing?! You should dance too!" Yumi called out, approaching us again with some brisk steps. Her gaze was fixed on Shilly Rou.

"Are you perhaps talking to me...?"

"Who else would I be talking to?! Oh, and you should all come dance too!"

The second half of that statement was directed at the wives from Dora's household. They happily rose to their feet, and then Morun Rutim was gently urged by her family to stand up and join them too. Shilly Rou, however, had gone pale.

"I-I'll refrain. I only came here for the food, after all."

"That's all the more reason to come with us, isn't it? The people of the forest's edge are holding this banquet to help us get along better! If you don't have any intention of trying to become friends with them, then what are you even doing here?!"

"N-No, but..."

“No matter what goal you had in mind when you came here, you can’t just ignore everything else! Even if the people of the forest’s edge are okay with that, I’m not! Now hurry up and get in that circle!”

And so, Yumi and Dora’s wife grabbed Shilly Rou’s arms and led her away. Shilly Rou was shooting Roy a desperate look for help, but her heartless friend just shrugged back at her.

I feel bad for Shilly Rou, but I think this is the liveliest Ruu banquet I’ve ever seen.

Thanks to the large number of guests, the number of people in attendance was no less than when everyone under the Ruu gathered, and thanks to all the different colors people were wearing—a much wider variety than the handful typically worn by the people of the forest’s edge—the scene was even more amazing to look at.

Then I noticed that Myme was now dancing with Rimee Ruu and Tara. Toor Deen seemed to have been dragged out by Yun Sudra as well. Even if she wasn’t quite dancing, she was still moving around the ritual fire in a circle with everyone else.

Atop a mat a short distance away from us, Gamley was cheerfully guzzling down fruit wine. Beside him were the star reader, Railanos, and the beastman, Zetta. Shantu was clapping along next to the musicians, while Rolo and Doga were surrounded by men who were thrusting food at them. For some reason, Dilo the vase man was chatting with Bartha and Jeeda about something. Perhaps they were pestering him for mysterious tales of foreign lands.

That made a thought come to me and I started looking around for a certain someone, only to find the vermilion-clad person in question already softly approaching me. It was Pino, who wasn’t participating in either the musical performance or the dancing.

“Hello there. Sorry for the late greeting. I am truly grateful that you invited us to this wonderful banquet.”

“Ah, it’s the Ruu clan who invited you. Still, I’m glad to have you all here with us.”

“Oh, I’m happy too. After all, we are creatures who are only truly alive at parties,” Pino said with a giggle as she stood there with her back to the bonfire. “Genos is a large town, but outside of the city walls they only celebrate the revival festival. If the barrier between the castle and the town became a bit lower, the common folk would start to have a bit more variety in their celebrations.”

“Oh yeah? So then, do the other parts of the western kingdom have a bunch of different occasions they celebrate?”

“Yes, they do. That’s why we only come to Genos once a year at most, but this time was especially enjoyable.”

Pino somehow seemed even more mysterious than usual here at the forest’s edge now that night had fallen. It was an odd feeling, like talking to a living doll. She appeared to be just a young girl, yet she seemed more worldly than most adults. Even without any acrobatics or flute playing, she had a strange way of stirring up my imagination.

While we were talking, the music shifted yet again. It now had a more relaxed tempo and a somewhat solemn melody.

There was also a new sound overlapping the others that hadn’t been part of the music before. It was from the seven-stringed instrument Neeya played. He was seated in the center of the group of musicians, providing his wonderful voice as an accompaniment for his instrument.

“Allow me to sing you but a single song. Please, keep your lovely dance going.”

Ai Fa stirred a bit next to me, while Pino chuckled once again.

“Please do not worry, my dear lady hunter. Nothing about this song should evoke unpleasant feelings in any of you, and we have received permission from your leading clan head and elder to present it.”

“From Donda Ruu and Granny Jiba?” Ai Fa said, but Neeya started his song before she could get her confirmation.

It was a tale of the eastern people, from a time even further back than the era of Sym’s unification thanks to the efforts of Misha the White Sage... It was the

story of the eighth tribe of Sym that was spoken of in legend.

Long ago, there was an eighth tribe in Sym. However, they did not live in any fixed place, instead wandering all throughout the country. If they were in the mountains, they would live as the people of the mountains did, and when in the plains they would live like the people of the plains instead. They were the Gaaze tribe, also called “the people of the clouds” by others.

They were a peace-loving tribe, but whenever they were attacked, they would strike down their foes with unparalleled strength. They drifted across the land without a care, like puffy clouds in the sky, but when the times called for it, they would turn pitch black and become a thunderstorm, proving themselves to be more powerful than any other tribe.

Eventually, they became ostracized in Sym. The two largest tribes among the people of the mountains who effectively ruled the land got into a dispute with them that evolved into a bloody feud. Apparently, those mountain tribes also eventually became the barbarians who later drove the Rao to the brink of destruction. Of course, the Gaaze were more powerful than the Rao and refused to simply resign themselves to defeat, but it was clear to all that the conflict would never end until one side or the other was brought to ruin.

And so, the Gaaze tribe abandoned Sym. After all, no matter where they went within the country, they would be unable to avoid conflict with the people of the mountains. If they moved to the plains, they might end up involving the tribes living there too. Fearing what would happen if the war were to spread, the Gaaze instead sought a place to live outside of Sym’s borders, heading west.

Eventually, their path was obstructed by a dark gray bog, which forced them to turn south. There they came across a rocky mountain so rugged that they could no longer ride their tolos, so they released their mounts on the plains and advanced through the area on foot. For a people as tough as them, even the most rugged mountain was no great challenge for them to traverse.

What awaited them on the other side of the mountain was a barren desert. They could never survive in such a place, so they crossed it as well.

Beyond the wasteland, they found a black forest where equally black beasts lived. This was certainly not a place where they could live peacefully either, so

they decided that they would proceed through the black forest, and travel farther to the west or south from there.

However, it was then that the Gaaze encountered the people of the white queen. They were incredibly strange, small and white in appearance, and completely impossible to understand. It was almost hard to believe that they were human. But somehow, they possessed the unusual ability to hear the voice of the forest.

They belonged to no named god, and instead called the forest their mother. The Gaaze—who had abandoned their god, Sym—sensed some sort of fate at play, and worked together with the people of the white queen to fell the black beasts.

Eventually, the chief of the Gaaze promised himself to the white queen, and together they had a child.

The Gaaze decided they would live in the forest, and die there as well. They learned the words of the white queen, and the two groups came together as one in their battle against the black beasts, becoming the people of the black forest.

That was the end of the story.

The final note of Neeya's song vanished beyond the borderline between the firelight and the darkness.

The people of the forest's edge responded to the song not with cheers and applause, but with silence. At some point, everyone had stopped dancing. They were all just standing there, as if their souls had been sucked out of them. Yumi, Myme, and Telia Mas were standing in the middle of the crowd, looking around at everyone in bewilderment.

"That was the tale of 'The Black King and the White Queen.' You there, young lady, do you have a request for my next song?" Neeya said, still looking entranced as he turned toward Yumi.

Yumi shot him a doubtful look, but then she crossed her arms and said, "Let's see... That one just now didn't seem to be very good for dancing. Maybe something like 'Vairus's Banquet'?"

“A tale of the fire god Vairus? That one is our troupe leader’s favorite.”

On Neeya’s signal, Zan started banging away on his drum again, while Nachara and the twins began playing a grand, energetic melody.

The women who had been standing around dumbfounded came back to their senses and started moving again, following Yumi’s lead. The whole plaza was once again awash in a lively musical performance, with enough excitement and mirth that it made the silence from a moment ago feel like a figment of my imagination.

“Ai Fa, that song just now...” I said, turning toward my clan head.

“Yes,” she replied with a nod and a grave look on her face. “He referred to the people of the black forest... And the Gaaze were the leading clan before the Suun.”

“Oh, so I was right? I’ve suspected for a while that the legend told in that song might have something to do with the people of the forest’s edge,” Pino chimed in with an amused smile, her vermilion sleeves swaying. “Your elder seemed quite moved when she saw the black ape, so I mentioned the song and asked if you all would be interested in hearing it. Your leading clan head gave his permission, so I told that blockheaded minstrel to take center stage.”

“I see...” Ai Fa said.

“But still, legends are ultimately just legends. They’re all tall tales told by minstrels, so you can laugh off most of what they say. After all, no living person can speak to the truth of what happened several hundred years ago.” Pino stepped toward us and leaned in so that her face was close to ours as we sat atop the mat. “Our job is to surprise people and bring them joy. We don’t care about anything but that... And that blockhead is the same as the rest of us on that front.”

“Are you saying we shouldn’t feel angry about what that man did before?”

“My, what a frightening expression... Yes, that fool is a scoundrel who can only enjoy life when he’s singing. He would never use his precious songs for something petty like picking a fight. I doubt he was trying to do anything as childish as giving Asuta a scare with his tale, at least.”

Ai Fa didn't say anything in response.

"I'm not asking you to forgive that blockhead. And I certainly won't try to make excuses for myself if I'm bothering you by bringing it up. It's just..." Pino said, her red lips twisting up into a smile. She was backlit by the bonfire, so her black eyes were cast in shadow. I could feel a chill run down my back. It was like I was peering into an abyss. "Old man Rai, our star reader, is a citizen of the west, but he apprenticed under an easterner. He's a pretty eccentric guy, but he's very skilled, to the point that he can rival the great star readers of Sym in terms of his ability to tell fortunes and his knowledge in general. And star readers have been terribly interested in people without stars for quite some time..."

"Hey," Ai Fa interjected in a sharp tone.

But the girl with the abyss-like eyes only smiled wider in response. "I have no intention of running my mouth where I shouldn't. It's just that old man Rai has all sorts of things he'd like to tell you about starless ones. We owe you an awful lot, Asuta, so isn't it only natural that we'd want to help you out?"

Neither of us answered her.

"Of course, no one truly knows what starless ones really are. However, old man Rai has at least a little information on the subject that wouldn't reach the ears of anyone who isn't a star reader. So if you want to hear what he has to say, Asuta..."

"I know myself better than anyone," I replied, feeling like I was getting sucked into those eyes. "I may not know exactly how I ended up here, but I remember what happened to me in very fine detail. And besides, I've already decided to live the rest of my life as a person of the forest's edge."

"So you don't care about what it means to be a starless one?"

"That's right. No matter what I might hear, it won't do anything to change the path I'm on."

Pino instantly held her tongue, but kept on staring into my eyes.

There's a saying about how when you stare into the abyss, the abyss stares back at you, right?

Eventually, Pino straightened up, tilted her head toward the sky, and started laughing. “If that’s how you feel, then I suppose there’s nothing to discuss. Sorry for getting the wrong idea,” she said, lowering her head again to look at us directly with a completely different kind of smile. It was a transparent expression, filled with an all-encompassing affection. “We decided to cast aside our pasts as well, so we can focus on enjoying the present together instead. Just thinking about tomorrow is tiring enough, to say nothing of what happened yesterday. Nobody cares less about stuff like fate and stars than we do.”

“You do, huh?”

“Yup. I like that spirit of yours, Asuta. So much so that I’d love to throw you into our wagon and make off with you if I could.”

“Hey,” Ai Fa said warningly.

“Don’t make such a scary face. I’m fond of the people of the forest’s edge, so I’d never do anything so ridiculous. If I did, you’d probably chase me all the way to the ends of the world.” As she was talking, Pino’s expression steadily shifted back to one we were more familiar with—an impudent, teasing smile, like she saw right through everything and everyone...and yet, there was something charming about it that I couldn’t help but like. “We’ll be seeing you again a year from now. Take care until then, okay? I hope you’ll feed us some more delicious giba when we come back, Asuta of the Fa clan.”

“Yeah, of course,” I said, finally managing to smile back at her.

It was then that the music finally came to a stop, and Sheera Ruu took advantage of the gap to loudly call out, “The whole roast giba is finally ready! Why don’t you all take a short break and give it a try?!”

Looking in that direction, I saw that Vina and Reina Ruu had left the circle of dancers and were now standing beside Sheera Ruu, who had her meat carving knife at the ready. The people of the forest’s edge and their guests all cheered and started swarming toward them.

I also rose to my feet and looked down at my beloved clan head and our companions from town. “Let’s head on over too. With this many people around, it’ll all get eaten if we take too long.”

“Indeed,” Ai Fa replied with a nod.

“I suppose that’s true,” Shilly Rou added, also nodding.

Behind us, Roy, Dan Rutim, and Dora were rising to their feet as well.

With the pale moon hanging above us in the sky, the darkness of night continued to descend over the world, yet this plaza alone remained awash in light, with the banquet showing no signs of ending anytime soon.

Intermezzo: After the Banquet

After the Ruu clan's friendship banquet had come to a close, Mikel and several of the other male visitors were led to the place where they'd be spending the night—the branch family house where Jeeda and Barthia were staying. Barthia was going to be sleeping in a different house so that the men could all stay here. The group included Jeeda—naturally, since this was his home—Asuta of the forest's edge, and the men who were visiting as guests: Mikel, Roy, Dora, and Dora's two sons.

"Come on, get it together. If you can't walk on your own two legs, we'll have to roll you across the floor."

Dora's sons were basically carrying their father's large frame between them. Dora had participated in a drinking contest with hunters from the forest's edge, and as a result he had ended up completely and utterly smashed.

"Watch your footing. You'll be sleeping over here," Jeeda said, advancing into the main hall with a candlestick in hand, and the group quickly spotted where the bedding had been laid out.

"Wow. This is pretty spacious. You and your mother have been living here on your own, Jeeda?" one of Dora's sons asked while pulling his father into the hall.

After sitting the candlestick down by a window, Jeeda nodded and gave a blunt reply of, "Yeah. Apparently, a Ruu branch family used to live here. But their numbers decreased enough that they started living with another of the branch houses."

"Giba hunting is so dangerous that not many of their men survive to an old age, from what I'm told. The people of the forest's edge put their lives on the line constantly in order to protect our fields," one of Dora's sons quietly said while laying his father down atop the bedding. Dora's face was bright red, and within just a couple moments he was happily snoring away. "Our father's been really happy about being able to grow closer to them like this. And we feel the

same way, of course.”

“I’ve helped out with giba hunting too, but I’m really just a guest... You should say that to a person of the forest’s edge instead,” Jeeda said, his bestial golden eyes shifting over toward Asuta.

Asuta rustled his black hair, laughed, and replied, “Ah, no, I certainly consider myself a full-fledged person of the forest’s edge, but I’m a chef, not a hunter. They’re the ones you should be telling that to... And anyway, I think you’ve already done a good enough job of letting them know how you feel tonight and during the revival festival.”

“Yeah. I really am glad to have had the opportunity to speak with so many people of the forest’s edge.”

Asuta and the vegetable seller’s boys were sharing satisfied smiles with each other as Mikel watched them from a few steps away. He had heard that the people of the post town and the Daleim lands had been reforging their relationship with the people of the forest’s edge over the past year... However, as a former resident of the castle town who currently lived in the Turan lands, that was a rather distant matter for him.

This is no place for an outsider like me to come barging in, Mikel thought to himself, his gaze then turning toward the figure next to him—the young chef from the castle town, Roy, who was just standing there idly. *This kid must be feeling the same way...*

Roy had only come here because of his curiosity as a chef. It was only natural that he was even more out of place than Mikel.

“All right, tonight was a lot of fun, but we should be getting to sleep now.” The vegetable seller’s sons then lay down on their bedding. They had enjoyed about as much fruit wine as their father, and had probably been having a hard time trying to stay awake.

After watching them lie down, Asuta turned back toward the rest of the group with a bashful smile. “Seems they were pretty tired. Would you all like to get to sleep too?”

“Hmm? What else is there to do, other than sleep?” Mikel said.

“Well, it’s just that I didn’t get to talk to you much during the banquet...so it feels like a bit of a waste to go to sleep now.”

“Hmph,” Roy snorted. “With how spirited that banquet was, I’m still not tired at all. But we just saw each other yesterday, so I’m sure you’re sick of talking to me.”

“Not really. I haven’t talked to you enough yet either, Roy.”

As they were chatting, Asuta and Roy sat down cross-legged on their bedding. Jeeda was seated up against the wall, tilting his head a bit as he regarded the two of them.

“You aren’t going to sleep yet? Then I guess I can leave the candle burning for a while longer.”

“Thanks. We’ll make sure to put out the fire, so you don’t need to force yourself to stay up, Jeeda.”

“I see. So you’re saying you have nothing to talk to me about?”

“Oh, come on, I didn’t mean it that way,” Asuta shot back with a laugh, only for Jeeda to turn away with an indignant grunt. It seemed he wanted to talk with Asuta too.

Seriously, what a weird kid... Mikel thought as he crossed his legs too.

It had been five months now since Mikel had met Asuta. A merchant from the east named Shumiral who belonged to a group called the Silver Vase had told him to talk to someone named Asuta of the Fa clan about the crimes of the house of Turan... That was what had brought them together.

Mikel had been driven from the castle town because he had opposed the former head of the house of Turan, Cyclaeus. Since he had refused to let the house of Turan hire him, their goons had severed the muscles in Mikel’s right arm so that he could no longer work as a chef, and then he had been banished from the castle town along with his very young daughter, Myme.

From that day forward, Mikel had taken to drowning his sorrows in wine. With his right arm not working properly, his future had been stolen from him. If it weren’t for Myme, he mostly likely would have returned his own soul to the

western god before long. After spending five years in that slovenly state, though, Mikel met Asuta.

Asuta was still a young chef. Apparently, he had come from overseas, and while many of his cooking techniques resembled Mikel's own, they were all wildly unorthodox. But when Mikel tasted Asuta's cooking, something that had been smoldering inside of him all this time was at last reignited.

And that's not all... Mikel thought, glaring at Asuta's smiling face from the side.

Asuta was a singularly strange kid. He was usually incredibly kind and even a bit silly, but at times he could be remarkably keen. Asuta had a way of affecting Mikel's emotions, and not just with his cooking abilities, but with his personality as well.

"And then you told Jeeda where the Turan manor was, right Mikel?" Asuta suddenly said, turning toward Mikel.

Mikel hadn't really been listening, so he furrowed his brow and said, "Hmm? What are you going on about? What's this about the Turan manor?"

"Huh? You weren't listening? We were talking about when I was kidnapped by Lefreya," Asuta replied with a smile. "Thanks to you telling Jeeda the location, Ai Fa and the others were able to come up with a plan to get me back. I owe both of you big-time."

"All that happened was, he asked me a question and I answered it. He seemed like he'd draw his blade on me if I didn't tell him what he wanted to hear, after all."

"I was obsessed with my hatred of the nobles back then. I've always felt sorry for treating you that way when you did nothing wrong," Jeeda said, his eyebrows drooping. Though he could be unsociable and overly intense like so many hunters were, at his core he was an earnest and straightforward kid. Otherwise, the people of the forest's edge would never have welcomed him in as a guest.

"Heh, looks like you're just surrounded by benefactors. That must be nice. I'm ashamed to say that I was on the wrong side in that story, though," Roy said in

an unhappy tone.

Mikel sensed the meaning behind his words, but Asuta smiled and added an explanation anyway. “You see, Roy was working at the Turan manor back then. He was tasked with watching over me in the kitchen.”

“Yeah. So I was one of your hated enemies.”

“That’s not true at all. You hadn’t even heard about the issues between the people of the forest’s edge and the house of Turan at the time.”

Roy ruffled his curly hair and turned away awkwardly. He was a good kid at his core too. And though he had an appropriate amount of pride for a resident of the castle town, he was also firm in his convictions. It was impossible to imagine a chef from the city of stone coming all the way to the forest’s edge to study their cooking otherwise.

Thinking about it that way, as odd as Asuta was, it was possible that Jeeda and Roy were both just as strange. They all had a vibrant enthusiasm and vitality about them, which was almost blinding to someone as old and worn down as Mikel.

Youths like them brimming with strength are the ones who will carve out the path to this world’s future...

Despite being so young, Asuta was a chef who possessed incredible skill. And he wasn’t just skilled. His talents were bolstered even further by the incredible passion he had for his cooking. The people of the forest’s edge, folks from the post town, and even the nobles of the castle town were all equally charmed by the food he made.

As for Roy, Mikel wasn’t in any position to know very much about him. It had been five years now since the two of them had worked in the same restaurant, and back then Roy had been a literal kid in training, so he hadn’t left any strong impression on Mikel.

But in those five years, before he had even reached the age of twenty, Roy had grown skilled enough to catch Cyclaeus’s eye just as Mikel had, and had been invited to work for the house of Turan. And that was proof that he possessed incredible tenacity to go along with his great skill.

Then you had Jeeda, who was honest and dauntless enough to be mistaken for a person of the forest's edge. The hunters here owed their skill and spirit to their unique environment, but he had been born the son of a bandit, and though he had temporarily been overtaken by his hatred of the nobility, he had managed to return to his true and proper self. His calm and composed nature despite his young age was surely the result of the extraordinary hardships he had faced throughout his life.

Myme's sure to live a good and healthy life, surrounded by folks like them, Mikel thought to himself.

Then Asuta called out to him with a carefree smile, "At any rate, fate sure is a mysterious thing. We all used to be connected to the house of Turan in radically different ways, and yet here we are, spending the night together."

Mikel was taken by some sort of deep, mysterious emotion, but he just shook his head. "No... There's no need to include an old-timer like me in that. My role is over. There's nothing left of me but cinders."

Silence fell in the dimly lit room.

However, that silence was soon shattered by the loud voices of the three youths.

"What are you saying? You're not an old-timer, Mikel!"

"That's right. We're just kids who barely come up to your ankles!"

"You've been a great father to Myme. There's no reason for you to put yourself down like that."

Three sets of eyes stared at Mikel, each filled with their own emotions. Feeling warmed by their gazes, Mikel snorted back, "Hmph. What's wrong with calling an old-timer what he is? I see no reason I should have to listen to the babbling of a bunch of kids less than half my age."

After looking puzzled for a moment, a bright smile broke out on Asuta's face. "Right. That's what makes you who you are, Mikel. I hope you'll be willing to keep guiding us flawed novices in the future."

"You're all so noisy," Mikel grumbled back, lying down on his bedding.

His own daughter, Myme, was younger than anyone here. He intended to continue watching over her for a long time, and he'd surely end up doing the same for them too.

And so, with his heart still full of difficult emotions, Mikel closed his eyes.

Afterword

Thank you so much for picking up this book, the twenty-second volume of *Cooking with Wild Game*.

It's because of all of you that I've been able to put out this many volumes. I couldn't possibly thank you enough.

This volume deals with the aftermath of the sun god's revival festival, as well as the start of the new year. I hope you're looking forward to seeing what's to come.

This time, the story goes back and forth between the castle town and the forest's edge, and the townsfolk are invited to the Ruu settlement, with a ton of characters making appearances, like always. My hope is that you'll enjoy all of their various interactions while referencing the character sheet at the front of the book when you need to.

The bonus intermezzo story ended up being from Mikel's point of view. There's another short story from the women's point of view that takes place during this time frame, and it will eventually see publication as well, but I decided to give this slot to the men.

By the way, the web version does a popularity survey each year, and this volume's contents were published around the same time that the second one was held. In other words, the second anniversary of the serialized version. It kind of amazes me that I was able to write twenty-two volumes' worth of text during that period.

At any rate, I figured this would be a good time to publish the results.

Popularity Poll:

1: Ai Fa

2: Ludo Ruu

3: Dan Rutim

4: Asuta

5: Toor Deen

6: Gazraan Rutim

7: Shumiral

8: Rimee Ruu

9: Raielfam Sudra

10 (Tie): Shin Ruu/Yamiru Lea

Characters You Want to See Star in a Bonus Story:

1: Jiza Ruu

2: Arishuna

3: Yamiru Lea

And there you have it.

The top four were the same this time around as in the first survey. I obviously expected the main characters, Asuta and Ai Fa, to be there, but it was a surprise to see how deeply popular Ludo Ruu and Dan Rutim are. Ai Fa and Asuta remained in the same positions, first and fourth respectively, in the third and fourth surveys that followed as well. The second and third spots changed, but Asuta somehow managed to stay fixed in fourth place, which amusingly felt like some kind of curse.

I was also really impressed with how many votes the male characters earned. While it did push me to try to give the female cast even more charm, I was also glad to know how popular the men were.

The ninth place character, Raielfam Sudra, hasn't appeared very many times so far, but he was still able to claim a spot on the list. In terms of the light novel releases, I believe his last appearance was all the way back in volume fifteen, and he didn't even have a name until then, despite the pivotal role he played in the execution of the criminal Tei Suun. What an odd character. Ranking ninth is

quite an achievement for a small, middle-aged man who was mostly known for having a wrinkled face like a monkey's.

At any rate, Raielfam Sudra is a personal favorite of mine as well, so I was quite happy with the results.

Also, starting in the next volume, the second round of the Group Performance is going to begin. It will last for seven stories altogether, three of which will be centered around the characters from the above story.

Volume releases are a completely different format compared to publishing on the web, so we're still considering the best way to release these extra stories, but I hope you're all looking forward to seeing them continue alongside the main plot.

Let me finish by thanking everyone involved with the production of this book, and of course, all of you who purchased it.

See you again in the next volume!

August 2020,

EDA

A full-page illustration of a young woman with short, wavy brown hair tied back with a black clip. She has a determined, slightly angry expression, looking directly at the viewer. She is wearing a dark green hooded cloak over a dark green tunic and dark green pants. Her right hand is raised to her chin, with her index finger pointing up. The background is a soft-focus landscape with blue and yellow tones, suggesting a rocky or mountainous area.

“Don’t expect to win me over like that. You have ensorcelled Varkas, and that makes you my enemy,”

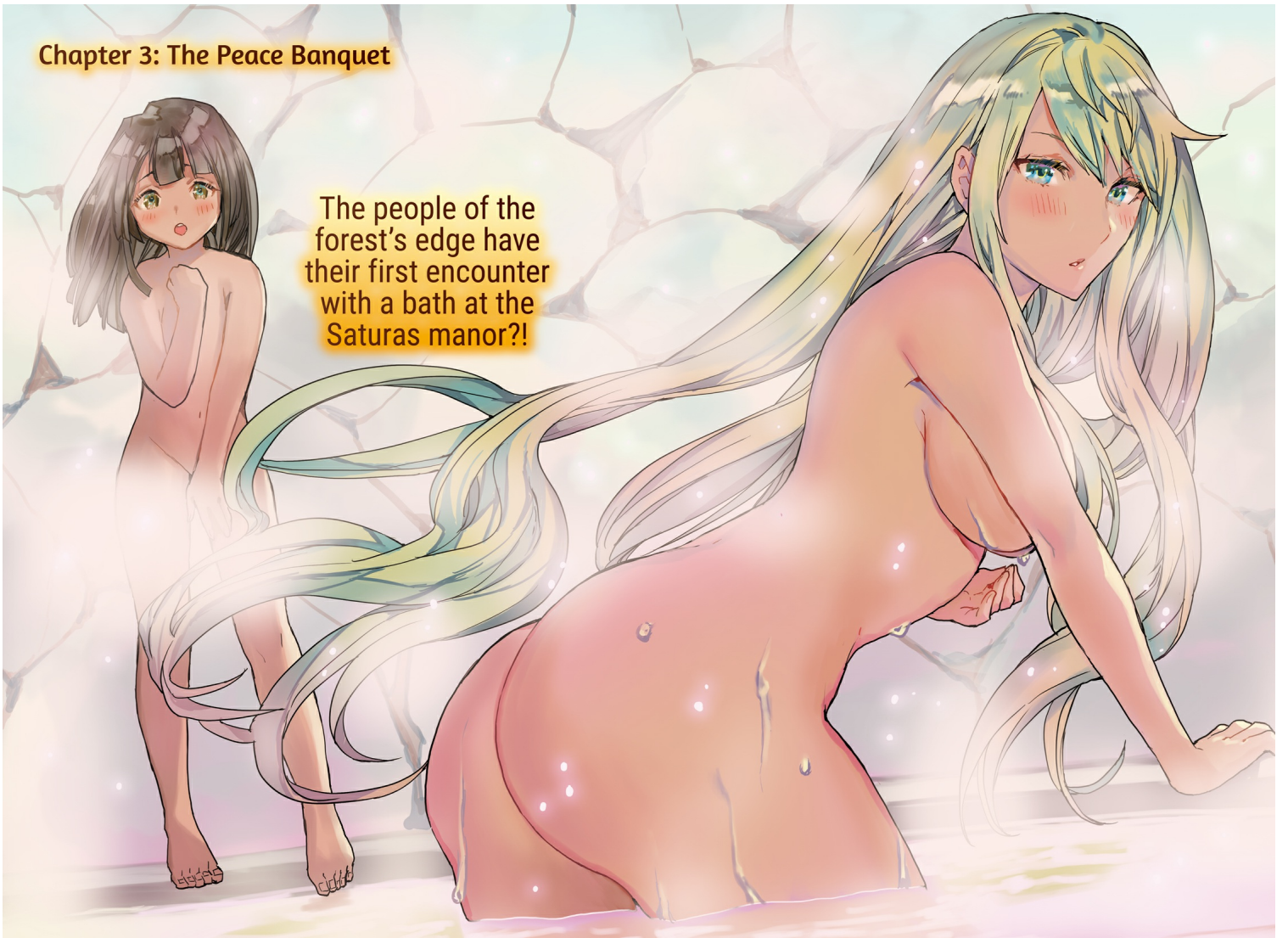
she muttered, and then she briskly jogged off down the road.

Shilly Rou

One of Varkas’s apprentices. A chef capable of creating delicious meals. Feels a strong sense of rivalry toward Asuta, who is her age, as well as the younger Myme.

Chapter 3: The Peace Banquet

The people of the forest's edge have their first encounter with a bath at the Saturas manor?!





“It is, isn’t
it? I could
happily eat
a whole lot
more.”

“Mmm, delicious!
It’s not bitter at
all! Or, maybe it
is? I don’t know,
but it’s really
tasty!”

Bonus Short Story

The Knight King and the Female Hunter

Rolo was a strange girl.

For starters, despite being a young woman, she dressed like a man. Her face didn't look half bad, but the length of her hair was middling, and she always wore it tied up behind her head. Her typical attire was also pretty shabby, even more so than that of the average resident of the post town, so at a glance, she just looked like some timid boy.

She wasn't especially tall, and her shoulders and back were always slumping, which made her look weak. Perhaps what stood out most were her eyes, which were always darting about restlessly. Lem Dom had never before seen anyone so nervous and lacking in confidence.

Well, what's strangest of all is how this timid girl was judged to be as strong as the top eight under the Ruu, Lem Dom thought to herself.

Meanwhile, Rolo was looking her way with a terribly troubled expression.

"U-U-Um, I'm sorry, but you're very much mistaken if you think I'm some kind of amazing sword master. I'm just an assistant to the traveling performers, with nothing interesting about me at all..."

"An assistant? But Ludo Ruu said his group saw your performance in the post town, and it was absolutely amazing," Lem Dom replied.

"Gyah!" Rolo shrieked, her freckled face going bright red. "P-Please, stop. I'm completely useless, and my performance is nothing but filler. I'm just a worthless lump who holds everyone else back."

"Never mind your performance. What I care about is the fact that you're supposed to be stronger than most hunters of the forest's edge."

They were currently off to the side of a stand-alone cookhouse at the Ruu settlement. When Lem Dom had heard that the traveling performers were

staying here, she had come rushing over, and now she was facing down Rolo in an empty space a short distance away from the kitchen where the chefs were hard at work.

Ludo Ruu was standing with some of the other members of the Gamley Troupe around the kitchen's entrance. He was staring intently at the two young women who were about to fight each other, having been tasked with keeping an eye on the performers to make sure they didn't get up to any mischief while they were at the settlement. Rolo's comrades, on the other hand, seemed rather disinterested.

"Ludo Ruu over there is highly skilled at assessing people's strength, and he says yours is worth acknowledging. That's why I wanted to challenge you to a match."

And yet, Lem Dom just couldn't sense such strength from this spindly girl. She herself was about a hand's width or so taller than Rolo, and her body was as toned as a man's. Rolo, meanwhile, was lanky and skinny, and she seemed to lack any kind of spirit for battle.

"But you're an official guest of the Ruu clan, so it would be bad for me to hurt you," Lem Dom said, picking up a reasonably long stick that was on the ground next to her feet. It was perfectly straight and around the length of her arm. "Would you mind grabbing the opposite end of this stick?"

"L-L-Like this?" Rolo asked, gripping one end of the stick with her slender fingers. Lem Dom then wrapped her fist around the other end.

"It would be dangerous to just launch right into grappling, so we'll start with a tug-of-war. We'll pull on this stick until one of us loses their grip or gets swept off their feet."

"Th-This kind of challenge is more Doga's thing, though..."

"Oh, they do tugs-of-war in town too? In that case, let's just get started," Lem Dom declared, but Rolo didn't move in the slightest. She just kept on staring up at Lem Dom, looking terribly troubled. "What is it? The match has already started, you know."

"B-But I don't know what I should do..."

“Oh, really? Then I guess I’ll help myself to this stick.”

With that, Lem Dom pulled back hard. However, Rolo just stretched her arms and body out as much as Lem Dom moved away, so the aspiring hunter failed to take possession of the stick. Also, Rolo’s feet had remained in place, leaving her bent over in a way that looked really unnatural.

Is this girl trying to mess with me? Lem Dom’s patience ran out and she pulled on the stick as hard as she could. And yet, Rolo didn’t fall to the ground. She was pulling back with just as much strength as her opponent, while staring at Lem Dom with a terribly apologetic look in her eyes.

Lem Dom’s blood boiled, and she started swinging her arms around recklessly. But this did nothing to wrest the stick from Rolo’s grasp, as if the knight king’s arms had fused with it, never to let go. And somehow, there didn’t even seem to be any resistance against the swinging coming from the other end.

“You little...!”

Lem Dom dropped her hips and thrust the stick forward with all the strength she could muster, as if she was drawing a sword.

Rolo’s torso was directly in the path of her opponent’s thrust, so if she continued to do nothing but hold on, the end of the stick would end up shoved into her solar plexus. Perhaps sensing that, Rolo deftly turned her body. Her feet hadn’t moved in the slightest, and yet she still managed to dodge the blow just by twisting her hips.

Lem Dom stumbled forward, having put all of her strength into the thrust, and the stick slipped from her hands, leaving Rolo as the only one holding it.

“A-Are you all right?! I’m so, so sorry! I dodged without thinking!”

Rolo was bowing her head over and over in a panic.

Lem Dom slowly rose to her feet and shot Rolo a smile.

“I get it now. You’re incredibly skilled at diverting your opponent’s strength. It felt as if I was chasing around a fluttering leaf.”

“I-I don’t quite get what you mean, but you aren’t hurt, are you? We should just stop now; it’s too dangerous to keep going, okay? Okay?!”

“What are you saying? The real fun is yet to come.” Lem Dom felt heat rushing through her whole body. At last, she was able to see a fraction of this girl’s mysterious strength. “I’ll take care not to injure you... Actually, that was a pretty arrogant thing for me to say, wasn’t it? Anyway, let’s start the contest of strength.”

“A-A contest? What sort of contest? I’m no good with rough stuff!”

“Never mind, just do whatever you want. Hurt me all you like; I promise not to complain!” Lem Dom said as she lunged at Rolo.

Rolo let out a strange cry of “Grah!” and bent down. And then...her right hand, now free of the stick, grabbed onto Lem Dom’s arm from below. At the same time, she swept Lem Dom’s legs, sending her opponent swiftly tumbling down to the ground.

It had all happened so fast that Lem Dom’s eyes hadn’t been able to follow the performer’s movements. She rose to her feet, feeling an intense emotion bubbling up inside her, though it wasn’t anger.

“You really are amazing. It’s time for me to get serious.”

“N-No, please don’t! This is dangerous!”

Rather than listening, though, Lem Dom circled around to her opponent’s side. Every instinct in her body was telling her that attacks relying on power alone wouldn’t work. She had to use swift movements to confuse her opponent and create an opening to strike.

Rolo stumbled backward, looking as if she was about to cry, and when Lem Dom started to reach toward her chest, she shrieked, “Ack!” and twisted her body.

There!

Lem Dom took a big step in the opposite direction from the way Rolo had turned. Now almost directly aligned with the performer’s side, she reached out and grabbed the girl’s left shoulder. At this point, she just needed to hook one of her opponent’s legs with her own and bear down with her weight, and Rolo would completely lose her footing.

Half convinced of her victory, Lem Dom kicked out with her right leg. However, it completely failed to connect with anything solid as it swung through the air. Then, before she realized what was happening, she felt her abdomen colliding with her opponent's hips. She had no recollection of coming in that close.

Rolo's body kept on twisting, despite the fact that her shoulder was still being gripped, dragging Lem Dom's body along with her.

Ah...

Lem Dom's left foot that had been planted on the ground was now rising up into the air as her hips were lifted up by her opponent's. She spun through the air, and then her back slammed onto the ground.

"I-I'm so terribly sorry! When I'm frightened, my body moves on its own..." Rolo said, staring down at Lem Dom with a look of panic on her face.

Hitting the ground had badly winded Lem Dom, so she couldn't immediately reply. Her vision was full of white stars.

"Wh-What should I do...? I've gotta go call for someone..."

Rolo was about to stand up, but Lem Dom somehow managed to grab hold of her collar.

"It's fine... You haven't broken my ribs or anything yet... Our fight's only just getting started..."

"F-Fight? You really should stop. This is dangerous."

"I won't let you quit while you're ahead... Jeez, what a strange woman you are..." Lem Dom placed her other hand on the ground and managed to sit up, but her first hand remained firmly on Rolo's collar, to keep the girl from fleeing. "Phew... You really are incredibly skilled. How did you get that strong?"

"I-I'm not strong at all. I just keep running away, because I hate being hurt..."

"I guess it's an innate talent, then. Still, it doesn't change the fact that you're incredibly capable," Lem Dom remarked with a grin as she endured the throbbing pain running down her back. "You're a smaller woman than me, yet you possess such incredible power... I truly admire that."

“Oh no, I’m nothing special! You’re the one who’s amazing.”

“What’s so amazing about me?”

“Y-Your arms and shoulders are so muscular... And yet, you have such a pretty face...” Rolo replied with a limp smile, her face going red.

When she saw that, Lem Dom’s eyes opened wide and she said, “Oh? Could *that* be why you dress like a man?”

“What do you mean by ‘that’?” Rolo asked with a tilt of her head, and then her face went even redder. “N-No, that’s not it! I just dress this way because looking like a girl is dangerous when you’re traveling!”

“Aw, how dull. I was just thinking I could show you a fun time as thanks for having a contest of strength with me.”

“Huh...?! Y-You swing that way? O-Of course, I have no issue with how anyone swings, but...”

“It’s not about swinging one way or the other. It’s simply a way to kill time. I plan to become a hunter, so I have no intention of getting married. I just like to keep an eye out for opportunities to enjoy some pleasure without giving birth to a child. And in that case, it doesn’t matter if it’s with a man or a woman, right?”

It seemed that Rolo was quite an innocent young woman, judging from her bright red face and the way her mouth was flapping open and shut. “I-I-Is that so? I-I’ve heard that you people of the forest’s edge are supposed to be more chaste than the townsfolk, though...”

“Oh, yes. I’m afraid I’ve strayed quite far from the proper path that was laid out for me. Honestly, I had no business being born at the forest’s edge,” Lem Dom said self-deprecatingly.

Rolo seemed somehow taken with her words, and sighed. “Ah... That’s a feeling I know very well. People can’t choose where they’re born, after all...”

“Hmm? Are you talking about how you left your homeland behind to live as a traveling performer?”

“Well,” Rolo said, smiling in embarrassment and rustling her hair, “at this

point, I've completely forgotten about my homeland. Now the Gamley Troupe is the only place I can call home."

"I see... I'm glad to hear you were able to find a new place to belong," Lem Dom said with a smile of her own. "But I've got no intention of abandoning my home, so I decided to forge my own path here at the forest's edge."

"Th-That's wonderful. I'm sure you'll be able to achieve your goals."

"Thanks," Lem Dom replied, rising to her feet. "But in order to do that, I need to gain the strength of a hunter, so could I get you to lend me a hand?"

"Huh? Y-You really want to keep fighting? Wouldn't it be better to find a more peaceful way to go about this?"

"This is faster. I'll show you a real fun time later, so hit me with everything you've got!"

"I-I told you, I'm not like that!"

As flustered as Rolo was, Lem Dom was enjoying herself just as much. It was awe-inspiring to know that this world had such an incredible person living in it. And it was all thanks to Asuta of the Fa clan and the way he kept stirring things up at the forest's edge that Lem Dom was able to meet this young woman.

I suppose I should be grateful to our mother forest that Asuta suddenly appeared here one day... Lem Dom thought as she squared off against Rolo.

And the forest of Morga all around the two young women silently watched over their actions, just as it always did.



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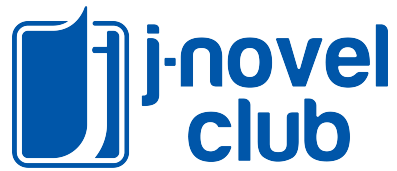
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Cooking with Wild Game: Volume 22

by EDA

Translated by Gwendolyn Warner Edited by Adam Fogle

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